

“When Good King Arthur Ruled in Ancient Days”

Folklore in Arthurian Literature

by

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“Even if most of the Arthur stories were borrowed or fabricated, it is still necessary to explain why they should ever have been attached to Arthur. Even if the bards vested him with the attributes of a god, the question still remains: Why him in particular? To which there is no adequate answer but the readiest one – because he deserved it.”

Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury*

“And withal, we still do not know where is Arthur's grave.”

E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*

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Chapter 1

“The World’s Wonder”¹: An Introduction to the Arthurian Tradition

1.1 “Anoeth Bid Bet y Arthur”

There is an old Welsh poem which dates from the ninth or tenth century AD called “Stanzas of the Graves”. It is preserved in several manuscripts, most importantly *The Black book of Carmarthen*. Supposedly a list of the graves of famous warriors, the poem contains the lines “[b]et y March, bet y Guythur/Bet y Guagaun Cledyfrut/Anoeth bid bet y Arthur”.² “Bet” means grave, and the Welsh word “anoeth” translates as “difficult”, “wonder”, “precious thing”, or “wonderful”. All these meanings imply that there is something out of the ordinary about Arthur’s grave. A common translation of the stanza is “There is a grave for March, a grave for Gwythur,/a grave for Gwgawn Red-sword;/the world’s wonder a grave for Arthur” (Shippey, p. 20). While these lines are not the earliest known reference to Arthur, they are among the first to hint at his mythical status by questioning the existence of his grave, or at least presenting it as something out of the ordinary. “Anoeth” can also mean “impossible”. Possible interpretations are that Arthur’s grave is “impossible [to find]” either because Arthur never existed, except as a legendary figure, or because he was buried in secret.³ The more common conclusion is that “Arthur’s grave was unknown because he was never buried, but was still alive somewhere, biding his time to return and deliver the Britons” (Sims-Williams, p. 49).

¹ “Stanzas of the Graves”, quoted in Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien created a new mythology*, second edition (Grafton, Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), p. 20.

² “Englynion y Beddau” (“The Stanzas of the Graves”), at http://llyfrgell.cymraeg.org/misc/englynion_y_beddau.htm

³ Patrick Sims-Williams, “The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems” in Bromwich *et al*, *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 49.

Whether or not Arthur is a historical person continues to be a matter of debate among scholars. Most Arthurian tales are set in the late medieval period. The medieval high king and the Knights of the Round Table of these stories are indisputably fictional⁴ and have been described as “impossibly anachronistic.”⁵ The question is what constitutes the basis for these tales. Arthur’s possible historicity is too big a topic to cover in a thesis of this length, but I will give an introduction to the debate in chapter 1.2. The quote from “Stanzas of the Graves” implies that the tradition that Arthur is not dead goes back a long time. Throughout the past 1500 years a significant body of folklore has grown up around Arthur and related characters, and Arthurian characters have been incorporated into existing folk-tales and folklore. My focus in this thesis will be folklore – general and Arthurian – in modern retellings of Arthurian legend. How is it used, and how does this function? Before I turn to the folkloric aspect of Arthurian legend, I find it useful to give an overview of the legend and the main literary traditions so as to have a frame of reference for the chapters on specific literary works.

1.2 “An Arthur-shaped gap”⁶: The Historical Arthur

The Romans first arrived at British shores in BC 55. They permanently occupied Britain and incorporated it into the Roman Empire in AD 43, and the last troops were not withdrawn until AD 407. After their withdrawal, a short period ensued during which the Celts, many of them strongly influenced by the Romans, ruled Britain,

⁴ Norris J. Lacy, “Arthur” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 21.

⁵ Wendy Boase, *The Folklore of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976), p. 22.

⁶ Rodney Castleden, *King Arthur: The Truth Behind the Legend*, second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 220.

which was divided into many smaller kingdoms, as they had done before the Roman invasion. In 449, Anglo-Saxons⁷ led by Hengest and Horsa arrived in Britain. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that they were initially invited by the Celtic King Vortigern “Brettum tō fultume”⁸, “in aid of/to help the Britons”. Scholars disagree about whether this first arrival was an attack, as opposed to a peaceful visit. It is described by the verb “gesohton”, which can mean both “attacked” and the more neutral “landed”⁹. Whether or not the intent of the initial arrival was peaceful, the Anglo-Saxons started fighting the Britons after a while. Vortigern was overthrown and by 457 Anglo-Saxon forces were gaining control. Two centuries later most of present-day England, with the exception of Cornwall, was under their dominion.

One thing is certain: If there was an actual Arthur, he and his society and reign will have been fundamentally different from those that are depicted in medieval romances. If Arthur existed he was not, as later versions of the legend would have one believe, English, but Welsh. He was probably a Celtic Briton who fought against the invading Anglo-Saxon forces during the late fifth and early sixth centuries AD. It has also been suggested that he may have been of Romano-British origin, “a late Roman commander from the Roman *gens* bearing the name Artorius”.¹⁰ Arthur is the Welsh form of this Roman name, and Ashe suggests that “records of several Arthurs up and down Britain in the late sixth century, when Roman names in general had become less common, hint that someone so named had by then been poetised into national hero.”¹¹ Many stories and tales were transmitted orally at this time. Of those which were written down and of historical records, few survive. It is, accordingly, a

⁷ A collective term for Angles, Saxons, and Jutes.

⁸ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, at <http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/asc/a.html>

⁹ Michael Benskin, Introduction to Old English lecture at the University of Oslo, Fall 2002.

¹⁰ Richard Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1990), p. 11.

¹¹ Geoffrey Ashe, *Mythology of the British Isles*, second edition (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 198.

little-known period of British history, sometimes referred to somewhat derogatorily as the Dark Ages.

If he existed, Arthur may have been a military leader rather than a King (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 197). The Welsh monk Nennius, whose *Historia Britonum* ('History of the Britons') dates back to around 800, describes him as *dux bellorum*, commander-in-chief, and states that Arthur fought twelve battles against the Saxons and won all of them.¹² Nennius's section on Arthur is the first extant mention of him in a historical work. Claims that the Arthur we know from legend is based on a historical person are supported by archaeological finds and early references such as that by Nennius and an entry in the tenth-century Welsh *Easter Annals* which states that a man called Arthur fought in the Battle of Badon in 516 and that in 537 the "Strife of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medrawt perished" (Castleden, p. 1), took place.

The first extant references to Arthur are old Welsh poems. The first is "Y Gododdin", a collection of elegies attributed to the bard Aneirin and probably dating back to around 600 AD.¹³ Aneirin describes the ferocity of a warrior by saying that "[h]e fed black ravens on the rampart of a fortress/Though he was no Arthur".¹⁴ If these lines are genuine and not "a later interpolation",¹⁵ it implies that not only was Arthur a fierce warrior, but people were familiar enough with him that Aneirin could use him as a basis for comparison.¹⁶ The man and his exploits had already become part of the Celtic frame of reference, even in the north of Britain, where "Y Gododdin" was written. Another early poem is the "Battle of Llongborth" or "Elegy for Gereint", the subject matter of which dates back to 540, although the poem itself

¹² Christopher Hibbert, *The Story of England* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), p. 30.

¹³ Peter Berresford Ellis, "Introduction" in *The Mammoth Book of Celtic Myths and Legends* (London: Robinson, 2002), p. 14.

¹⁴ Aneirin, "Y Gododdin", at <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/sources/aneirin.html>

¹⁵ Marjorie Rowling, *The Folklore of the Lake District* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1976), p. 37.

¹⁶ Gwyn Jones, *Kings Beasts and Heroes* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 94.

is probably more recent, and states that “[i]n Llongborth I saw Arthur’s/Heroes who cut with steel./The Emperor, ruler of our labour”.¹⁷ The poetic fragment “Who is the Porter” and the poem “The Spoils of Annwn”, both from the 11th or 12th centuries,¹⁸ also mention Arthur. In the latter two Arthur and his companions fight against witches and other supernatural creatures¹⁹ and raid Annwn, the Celtic Otherworld.²⁰

Those who deny that the figure of legend has any basis in reality, tend to focus on the impossibility of the actions and abilities attributed to Arthur in some medieval romances and in tales such as the early Welsh “Kilhwch and Olwen”, in which Arthur and the men of his court are presented as having supernatural abilities.²¹ Some have suggested that Arthur may be based on a mythological figure, a Celtic deity; others claim that he is a mere invention of literature. Early references to Arthur in a historical context such as those quoted above are few and far between, and are dismissed by some either as real but referring to a different Arthur than the subject of later romances, or more recent forgeries added to old manuscripts and later copies after Arthur gained popularity as a legendary figure.

Gildas makes no mention of Arthur in his *Book of Complaint on the Ruin and Conquest of Britain* (540), although he wrote it a mere three years after Arthur’s supposed death at Camlann. His book criticises British rulers, and he considered the Anglo-Saxon invasions divine punishment. While sceptics claim that the omission of Arthur by Gildas is proof of the former’s non-existent basis in reality, those who support the theory of a historical Arthur claim that either his reign was so well-

¹⁷ “Elegy for Gereint” at <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/sources/gereint.html>

¹⁸ Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), p. 19.

¹⁸ Brynley F. Roberts,

¹⁹ “Who is the Porter”, quoted at <http://www.mythiccrossroads.com/PaGur.htm>

²⁰ “The Spoils of Annwn [sic]”, quoted in Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, fourth edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 103-104.

²¹ Lady Charlotte Guest, translator, “Kilhwch and Olwen” in *The Mabinogion* (London: Voyager, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), pp. 79-111.

known to his contemporaries that mentioning it was superfluous, or that Gildas had an ambivalent view of him and neither wanted to criticise him nor present him as an exemplar for later kings (Castleden, p. 27).

While Gildas describes the Battle of Badon as a landmark battle (Castleden, p. 27), the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* makes no mention of it. As is the case with Gildas's silence about Arthur, both sides use this to support their views. The sceptics claim that it never took place. Their opponents point out that the *Chronicle* mainly concerns itself with battles in which the Anglo-Saxons were victorious. Badon may have been left out either because they lost or because it was not fought between the Anglo-Saxons and the Britons; it may have been civil war (Castleden, p. 35). The period when Arthur reigned was fairly peaceful when it came to fighting external enemies, but Gildas says that civil wars continued to be fought (Castleden, p. 96). If the legend has any basis in reality, Camlann may have been a battle that Arthur's warriors fought amongst themselves, rather than against a common enemy. The "Triads of the Isle of Britain" call it the worst of the futile battles of Britain, implying that it was fought for no good reason and had no useful or pleasant outcome.²²

Early sources provide an ambiguous picture of Arthur. In chronicles and historical works of the ninth and tenth centuries Arthur is portrayed as a real and successful leader. In poems and tales he is a semi-mythological figure, often of gigantic size; he has companions with superhuman abilities and journeys in the Otherworld. Scholars disagree about whether Arthur was originally a Celtic god who was reduced to an extraordinary man in poems and tales as Christianity gained a stronger foothold; or a successful and cherished military leader who was raised to god-like, immortal stature and to whom supernatural abilities were assigned in

²² "The Triads of the Isle of Britain" at <http://members.tripod.com/~igerne/triads.htm>

folklore. Recent research points towards the latter, but we may never know for sure. The sheer longevity and popularity of Arthurian legend have led many scholars to argue that it is bound to have some basis in reality. Also, it is a fact that the Anglo-Saxon invading forces were temporarily held at bay during the first half of the sixth century, the period when Arthur is said to have led his people in war, leading some to point out “an Arthur-shaped gap” (Castleden, p. 220) in early British history. Hibbert claims that there seems to be little doubt that “there came to the fore at this time a British cavalry leader of extraordinary prowess” (Hibbert, p. 30). Peter Hunter Blair goes as far as to state that “Arthur’s fame was great in the sixth century, though we do not know why”.²³

1.3 “History Goes Masking as Fable”²⁴: The Literary Arthur

Whatever his origin the fascination with Arthur continues, one and a half millennia after Aneirin mentioned him in “Y Gododdin”. Numerous tales about him have been recorded, some allegedly historical, some of a more purely literary nature. While the earliest surviving Arthurian references are found in poetry, some of the oldest extant Arthurian prose is collected in *The Mabinogion*, a compilation of old Welsh tales, some of which feature Arthur. They were first written down during the 14th century. Some date further back, having been preserved orally at least since the 10th century and in some cases maybe longer. Jackson states that in the 12th century, “the Welsh were the inheritors of a flourishing, vernacular literary tradition which can be traced

²³ Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, second edition (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 30.

²⁴ Wace, *Roman de Brut* (1155), quoted on <http://bsc.edu/~arthur/>

back for some six centuries. Part of this consisted of prose tales of popular entertainment, full of folk-lore, legend, and traces of pagan mythology.”²⁵ Arthur is not the chief character of *The Mabinogion*, but an important recurring figure, and the setting is presumably more true to the period when a possible historical Arthur may have lived than it is in later and more widely read romances. He and other *Mabinogion* characters are “half-remembered figures from a misty past, grown increasingly wondrous and larger than life, and attracting to themselves or being involved with the folk literature of earlier centuries” (Jones, p. 67). *The Mabinogion* is a significant source of Celtic mythology²⁶ and medieval Welsh folklore. Evans-Wentz says that particularly “Kilhwch and Olwen” is “probably much freer from foreign influences and re-working than the better-known romances of Arthur, and therefore more in accord with genuine Celtic beliefs and folk-lore”.²⁷ Lacy and Ashe state that the names and attributes of Arthur’s companions in this tale “doubtless reflect traditional lore now lost”.²⁸

The first to “popularize” Arthurian legend was the monk Geoffrey of Monmouth. His *Historia Regum Britanniae* (‘The History of the Kings of Britain’) dates back to 1136. Its aim is to provide an overview of the alleged history of Britain. Approximately one fifth of it is devoted to Arthurian material. The Normans had ruled Britain for seventy years by the time Geoffrey wrote his book. Geoffrey felt that the Britons had suffered at the hands of Roman, Anglo-Saxon and now Norman occupants, and wanted to write a work in praise of British Kings. He frequently

²⁵ Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, “Arthur in Early Welsh Verse” in Roger Sherman Loomis, editor, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 12.

²⁶ Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), p. 16.

²⁷ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), p. 317.

²⁸ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), p. 75.

refers to Gildas, Nennius, and the Saints' Lives²⁹ and claims to have access to "a very ancient"³⁰ book in Gaelic. If this is true, the book no longer exists, or at least it has not been recovered.

Geoffrey was popular among his contemporaries and during the rest of the medieval period. He has, however, suffered a lot of criticism in modern times (Castleden, p. 31). Despite the fact that some of *The History* is based on truth and that he may have had access to information now lost to us, many of Geoffrey's claims, such as the sacking of Rome by the Britons and the notion that Britain was founded by Brutus after the fall of Troy, are indisputably false. Some may be Geoffrey's own inventions, but he probably also draws "on a store of ballads and folk-tales, some of which [preserve] fragments of mythology dating from Arthur's epoch and earlier" (Ashe, p. 176). Geoffrey "could not find any written accounts of the kings before or after Arthur" (Castleden, p. 33), but refers to a widespread oral tradition on the subject (Castleden, p. 33). This tradition may have been based partly on history, but is probably also strongly influenced by folklore. Geoffrey's account has had a seminal influence, so if this is the case, folklore has helped shape Arthurian legend as we know it. Although the *History*'s historical value as such is dubious and unreliable and may not provide much factual information about Arthur, Geoffrey does provide an important insight about Arthurian legend as it existed in his time. Evans-Wentz describes *The History* as "the sum total in [Geoffrey's] time of all Arthurian history and myth, whether written or orally transmitted" (p. 323). Its literary merit is great, a fact which is often overlooked.³¹ It has inspired many

²⁹ Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury* (Glasgow: Collins, Fontana Books, 1973), p. 176.

³⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, "Dedication" in *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 61.

³¹ Thorpe, Lewis, "Introduction" in Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 24.

authors in addition to medieval romance writers. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is based on an episode from Geoffrey.

In 1155 the Norman poet Wace published a versified version of Geoffrey's *History*, and in 1200 the Saxon priest Layamon published a prose version which was based on Geoffrey and Wace, but also contained some new material. Wace makes the first literary mention of the Round Table, but he was apparently knew it from Breton folklore (Ashe, p. 208). He regretfully says that the tales of King Arthur have been told so many times that "the truth has turned to fable and an idle song [...]. Thus to make a delectable tune to your ear, history goes masking as fable".³² He is probably referring to the popularity of Arthurian legend as subject matter for French romances, and possibly also to folklore and folk-tales, which are often transmitted orally, leading to a certain embellishment of facts as time goes by. There has been a non-realistic aspect to Arthurian legend since the beginning, and by Wace's time, a significant body of Arthurian folklore was in existence.

Although the stories and legends of King Arthur are closely connected with Britain, Arthur's Celtic origin implies that the tradition also grew on the continent, particularly in Brittany, to which many Celts emigrated during the Saxon wars. Some scholars claim that Brittany is where the legend took shape and where the idea of the Round Table and of Arthur being asleep in a cave arose. The exiled Britons may have felt a particular need to maintain the belief in a legendary British leader who would return and conquer the invaders. Numerous French romances have been preserved. Some are based on earlier legends, others invent rather freely. Chrétien de Troyes's *Arthurian Romances*, which dates back to the late 12th century, is an influential collection. Some of the *Romances* appear in slightly different versions in

³² Wace, *Roman de Brut* (1155), quoted on <http://bsc.edu/~arthur/>

The Mabinogion. Although some of the latter probably predate de Troyes, the manuscripts which contain them do not. This makes it hard to decide which text influenced the other and how much change those in *The Mabinogion* have gone through. Many Arthurian tales are recorded repeatedly, with only minor differences, by several medieval writers. The focus during this period was on conformity and tradition, rather than originality and individuality (Lacy and Ashe, pp. 4-5).

A lot of the Arthurian folklore which is known to us dates back to the Middle Ages, and traces of it are discernible in the romances. Darrah states that “the ‘second generation’, that is, post-Chrétien, romances tend to transmit more mythological and folk-lore material than Chrétien himself”.³³ The “primitive Arthurian court” (Darrah, p. 117) of Welsh legend is “well represented in the French romances” (Darrah, p. 117). Darrah suggests that Chrétien and others rearrange motifs because they do “not understand the story they [are] repeating” (Darrah, p. 81), i. e. its alleged underlying pagan origin. The romance writers sometimes include remnants of forgotten legends and traditions, without being aware of their meaning. Significantly, they also tend to include references to contemporary folklore. An example is the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1360-70), which is written by an unknown poet.

The *Gawain*-poet alludes to Arthurian folklore by stating that he will recount “one of the wildest adventures of the wonders of Arthur” (p. 18), implying that many wonderful deeds and abilities are ascribed to him. Arthur is in the background most of the time in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. His court provides the starting point for the poem, but the main protagonist is Gawain. The poet includes a lot of general folkloric material. The Green Knight has often been interpreted as an incarnation of the Green Man, although this is a controversial point of view. He dwells in “a worn

³³ John Darrah, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), p. 54.

barrow” (p. 82). Such ancient burial mounds are fairy dwellings or entrances to Fairyland according to folklore.³⁴ On his way to fight him, Gawain encounters numerous folkloric creatures. “At whiles with worms he wars, and with wolves also,/at whiles with wood-trolls that wandered in the crags/and with bulls and with bears and boars, too, at times;/and with ogres that hounded him from the heights of the fells” (p. 38), the *Gawain*-poet states. He also gives a lively description of Christmas celebrations, including references to traditions such as carolling and the exchange of handsels, New Year’s gifts believed to be imbued with magical powers. Significantly, his description of Christmas refers to how it was celebrated when he lived, in the late fourteenth century, not in the early Middle Ages. This is true of most folklore in Arthurian literature. It is inspired by the period when it was written, not when the historical Arthur may have lived or when the story is supposed to have taken place. Even so, medieval literature, Arthurian or otherwise, is an important source of folkloric traditions. Folklore was not necessarily documented as such, but the inclusion of it in literary works helps preserve it.

The one who has probably had the most crucial influence on popular knowledge of and interest in the legend is the Englishman Thomas Malory. Arthurian legend had developed on and outside the British Isles for centuries when he published his massive epic *Le Morte d’Arthur* (‘The Death of Arthur’) in 1469. *Le Morte d’Arthur* is a comprehensive translation and compilation of French and English tales and romances. It is the “sum total” (Evans-Wentz, p. 323) of Arthurian material in Malory’s time (cf. Geoffrey above), providing the body of material with a sense of unity. One of the first books ever printed in English, it immediately gained popularity and is still widely read more than 500 years later.

³⁴ Malcolm Jones, “Burial Mounds [Barrows, lows, howes, *tumuli*]” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 52-55.

Although Malory begins by recounting how Arthur became King, the book gradually comes to revolve more and more around the quests of the Knights of the Round Table and the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. As is the case with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur himself, the common factor that ties all the stories together, remains in the background much of the time. The tales recorded by Malory and de Troyes were strongly influenced by the medieval ideal of chivalry. *Le Morte d'Arthur* is a sort of shrine to chivalry and the ideals of knighthood. By the time de Troyes wrote his *Romances*, Arthur's men had, in popular imagination, been modernized to become knights. Despite this and other discrepancies from the original warriors, Malory's account of Arthur is probably the Arthurian work which has come closest to become accepted as canon and which most exhaustively represents the romance tradition. Rolleston calls Arthurian legend "the accepted vehicle for the ideals and aspirations of an epoch".³⁵

Significantly, most extant Arthurian manuscripts are from the period after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Some accounts present Arthur as an Anglo-Saxon King fighting to protect his people from the Normans; later, he is depicted as a Norman himself. Arthurian legend is adapted and altered as society and power structures change. Late medieval literature, particularly Malory, defined Arthurian legend as we are familiar with it today. As a result, Arthur and his Court are presented in a high medieval light in most subsequent literature, including modern fantasy novels. In the romances Arthur is always king, never a mere military commander.

As I touched upon above, Arthur and Arthurian legend quickly became a part of people's common frame of reference. Authors continued to write about the legend or incorporate aspects of it into their work after the medieval period. The influence of

³⁵ Thomas Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celts*, (Middlesex: Senate Press Limited, 1998), p. 342..

Geoffrey and Malory is clearly discernible in the background. Edmund Spenser makes use of Arthurian legend in his allegorical Renaissance epic *The Faerie Queene*.³⁶ In the Victorian period, the chief addition to the ever growing body of Arthurian literature is Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetic cycle *Idylls of the King* (1856-74). I will concentrate on this in Chapter 2. The influence of Malory is clear: Tennyson's Arthur is a Celtic King who tries to prevent the Anglo-Saxons from gaining dominion, but he does so while wearing shining armour; his men are knights, and Tennyson's Camelot is reminiscent of a Gothic castle. Not only has Malory's version of Arthurian legend had a seminal influence; there was also a surge of interest in all things medieval during the Victorian period. Chivalry, embodied by Arthur and his knights, once again became an ideal.

During the twentieth century, the genre of fantasy literature has become increasingly popular. One of the classics of mid-twentieth century fantasy is the British writer Terence Hansbury White's version of the legend, which is strongly inspired by *Le Morte d'Arthur*. This is called *The Once and Future King* (1939-77) and consists of five books. I will examine it more closely in Chapter 3. While numerous writers have published their own retellings and interpretations of Arthurian legend, White's book is probably the account with which most modern readers are familiar. Other notable twentieth century Arthurian fantasy novels include those of Mary Stewart, on which I will concentrate in Chapter 4.

³⁶ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).

1.4 “Saddest story of all the long tales told”³⁷: A Brief Outline of Arthurian Legend

As I started working on this thesis it quickly became clear to me that Arthurian legend is multifaceted and has been subject to many interpretations over a period of one and a half millennium. It is hard to discern the remnants of the original legend, and its possible factual origin, from what has been changed, added and emphasized by historians and writers. The way in which it has been interpreted and used at different times by writers influenced by their times, cultural frameworks and their own agendas is, however, also part of what makes Arthurian legend intriguing. It is a major part of our legendary, mythological, and literary frame of reference and continues to puzzle historians, inspire writers and fascinate readers. Arthur is usually depicted as an ideal man and benevolent ruler who temporarily succeeds in restoring peace and order in a troubled Britain. His companions are the bravest and most virtuous men in the country; and that they are seated around a Round Table implies that they are all equal. But despite the initial grandeur and success the story of Arthur and his reign is in many ways a tragedy.

Arthur’s father, King Uther Pendragon, has Duke Gorlois murdered in order to have a child out of wedlock with Gorlois’s wife Igraine. Uther is compelled to do so by Merlin, who has foreseen that a child of the union of Igraine and Uther will grow up to unite the British kingdoms and become High King of Britain. Arthur is raised by Sir Ector. He grows up without knowing his parentage. During Arthur’s childhood, Uther dies without leaving a legitimate heir. Except Merlin, few are aware of Arthur’s identity. A sword in a stone is to decide who shall be Uther’s successor. Malory describes the stone as bearing the inscription “Whoso pulleth out this sword

³⁷ Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Wandering Fire* (London: Voyager, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), p. 135.

of this stone and anvil, is rightwise King born of all England”.³⁸ Only Arthur succeeds in pulling it out. He is accepted as the rightful heir to the throne, is crowned and receives the sword Excalibur (Caliburn in Welsh tradition), from the Lady of the Lake. The latter is sometimes identified with Arthur’s sister Morgan le Fay. She is often depicted as sinister in the medieval romances, where women generally tend to be portrayed in an unflattering light typical of the time.

Arthur marries the pious and beautiful Guinevere. Merlin, his advisor, warns him against this marriage, but Arthur does not heed his advice. Arthur starts the order of the Knights of the Round Table, who have to prove themselves worthy through quests and chivalrous deeds. His chief objectives are to restore order in a society which is under constant threat from foreign invaders and make it as “civilized” as possible, and to unite several petty kingdoms into one Britain. In early Welsh accounts, his court is said to be at Celli Wig in Cornwall or Caerleon in Wales. From de Troyes onward, it is usually said to be at Camelot.

Guinevere and Arthur love each other and are initially happy. But Arthur’s best and most trusted knight Lancelot and Guinevere fall in love. Arthur persistently ignores their relationship for many years. Guinevere and Arthur remain childless. Arthur does, however, have an illegitimate son: Mordred, borne to him by his half-sister Morgause, with whom he had a short, incestuous relationship while yet unaware of his descent and before marrying Guinevere. Morgause hates Arthur because he has killed her husband, King Lot of Orkney, in battle, ending her hope of her husband becoming High King of Britain. She seduces her brother and bears him a child, a royal, though illegitimate, heir to the throne. When he realizes that they are siblings, Arthur is persuaded to commit an act which is to haunt him for the rest of

³⁸ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur* volume one, editor Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 16.

his life: He orders all children born on May Day to be placed in a boat and sent out to sea. Most of them drown, but Mordred survives. He grows up alone with Morgause.

Mordred's brothers, Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris and Gareth, become Knights of the Round Table. Mordred is influenced by his mother and comes to hate Arthur. He plots against him by arranging for Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship to be publicly revealed. Arthur can no longer deny knowledge of the affair and is forced to sentence his wife to death for high treason. Guinevere is, to his relief, saved from being burned at the stake by Lancelot, against whom Arthur is forced to go to war. The Round Table disintegrates. Arthur's relationship with his sister is his undoing. In the Battle of Camlann, the situation has deteriorated to the point where Mordred and an army of Anglo-Saxons whose help he has enlisted, ally with those of Arthur's knights who have changed sides. They fight Arthur and those who remain loyal to him. Arthur kills Mordred at Camlann, but only after being fatally wounded by his son. Guinevere and Lancelot spend their last days in separate monasteries.

What happens after the battle is a crucial aspect of Arthurian legend. Arthur is carried away from the battlefield and Excalibur is returned to the Lady of the Lake, whose hand rises from the lake, catches it and brandishes it three times before pulling it under. The dying Arthur is brought to the Isle of Apples, Avalon, where he does, according to some traditions, sleep until the Britons are in need. Then, he will rise to save them. This belief persisted for a long time. The myth of the return of the King is still an integral part of the legend, and several versions of it exist in folklore.

Many aspects of the legend have been added along the way. Examples of this are the notion that Merlin was Arthur's tutor and councillor, the adulterous relationship of Guinevere and Lancelot and the Round Table. Myrddin appears in early Welsh literature, but does not appear to have had any connection with Arthur

before Geoffrey changed his name to Merlin and incorporated him into Arthurian legend. Castleden suggests that he drew on a “ninth-century British saga tradition and probably some semi-historical material too relating to the bard Myrddin” (Castleden, p. 33). Guinevere/Gwenhwyfar is known from *The Mabinogion*, the “Triads”, and an old Welsh Arthurian poem. Early versions of the legend, dating from before the invention of Lancelot, hold that Mordred usurps the throne and forces Guinevere to marry him while Arthur is away fighting. Some of the knights ally with Mordred, while others remain true to Arthur. There is also a tradition that Guinevere is captured by the enigmatic Melwas. As for Lancelot, he is an invented figure. His relationship with the Queen, a prominent part of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, is a fairly late addition to the legend. Indeed, only a few knights are from Celtic sources.

The legend’s adaptability to the changing demands of society is visible not only in the changing nationalities of Arthur, but in the emphasis on its religious aspects. It is hard to say whether the possible historical Arthur was a Christian. In *The Easter Annals*, it is stated that “he carried the cross of our lord Jesus Christ on his shoulder”³⁹ in the Battle of Badon (Castleden, p. 1). Christianity was taking hold among the Celts, who regarded the Anglo-Saxon invaders as heathens. Even so, the polytheistic Celtic religion had not yet disappeared. Local deities and nature gods were still worshipped, more or less in secret. The relationship between Arthur and Christianity is less than unambiguous in the early sources. In some Saints’ Lives Arthur is not depicted as particularly cherished.⁴⁰ The portrayal of him in hagiographic manuscripts is much less positive than that of both earlier and later tradition, because of an alleged disregard for religion. In the *Life of St. Carantoc*,

³⁹ Possibly a mistranslation for “shield”.

⁴⁰ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988), pp. 24-27.

Arthur is reported as planning to use an altar as a table.⁴¹ In a folk-tale based upon this incident, however, Arthur “gave twelve portions of land for a church” in exchange for the altar, and the table he used it for was the Round Table, suggesting that he was viewed more positively in folklore than by the clergy.⁴² In “Kilhwch and Olwen” it says that the Irish saints sought protection from him. Because he gave them his protection, “they gave him their blessing” (Guest, p. 107).

During the deeply religious Middle-Ages, emphasis on the Christian aspect of the legend grew. In the romances, Arthur is always a Christian. This might mirror reality. But it should be kept in mind that that religion was extremely important during the medieval period, and that early chroniclers such as Nennius and Geoffrey were monks and wanted to depict this national hero as a devout Christian. The most famous Arthurian quest is the search for the Holy Grail, allegedly the chalice from which Christ drank during the Last Supper. Many knights die during the quest for the Grail, which is usually interpreted as a metaphor for spiritual purity and enlightenment. The celibate and pious Galahad, Lancelot’s son by Elaine, eventually finds it. This part of the legend was added relatively late. It may be based on Celtic mythology. In “The Spoils of Annwn”, one of many poems attributed to the legendary bard Taliesin, Arthur and his men visit Annwn, the Otherworld. Among the things they obtain is the Celtic goddess Ceridwen’s Cauldron of Plenty.⁴³ Some scholars regard this as a pagan predecessor of the Grail (Lacy and Ashe, p. 42).

⁴¹ *Life of St. Carantoc*, quoted at <http://earlybritishkingdoms.com/sources/carantoc.html>

⁴² “King Arthur and the Dragon” in Katharine Briggs, *British Folk-Tales and Legends: A Sampler* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1977), p. 169.

⁴³ “The Spoils of Annwn” at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/annwn.htm>

1.5 “Arthur’s tomb is nowhere beheld, so that ancient songs fable he is still to come”⁴⁴: Folklore and Arthurian legend

The focus of my thesis is the use of folklore in Arthurian literature and the function and effect of this. I will first give a general introduction to folklore in Arthurian legend. Folklore as a discipline is related to mythology, but while the latter refers to comprehensive and coherent belief systems of a religious nature, folklore refers to “[t]he traditional, unofficial culture of communities (folk groups)”,⁴⁵ regardless of social class and background. Folklore deals with beliefs which are not part of an organized religion. Some would, perhaps, argue that any retelling of Arthurian legend is all folklore. This is, in my opinion, an oversimplification. It is likely that the legend has some basis in reality. Nevertheless, many of its elements are non-realistic in nature, for instance Arthur’s conception (during which Uther is enchanted to look like Gorlois) and, most significantly, the passing of Arthur. “Stanzas of the Graves” suggests that the latter was surrounded by mystery even in the seventh century, implying that there has been a magical aspect to Arthurian legend since early on. In Celtic tales Arthur and his companions have magical abilities and perform fantastical feats. Events of a supernatural nature, “wonders and marvels”,⁴⁶ also take place in the romances. As I touched upon in 1.3, many of these probably build on genuine folklore.

Some scholars have interpreted Arthur’s mysterious passing and the supernatural abilities he and his men possess in Celtic tales as a result of the original

⁴⁴ William of Malmesbury, quoted in Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988), p. 37.

⁴⁵ Carl Lindahl, “Folklore” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 138.

⁴⁶ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, volume i, editor Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 15.

Arthur having been a deity. Robert Loomis argues that Arthurian legend is at least partly mythological in origin and that many of the chief characters of romance build on Celtic gods of nature.⁴⁷ When it comes to Arthur himself, Loomis finds no proof that he was originally a god. No Celtic god “bears a name resembling Arthur’s”.⁴⁸ More likely, he was an actual commander-in-chief of great prowess to whom existing myths and legendary characters came to be attached and around whom a body of legends and myths, some new, some inspired by old ones, has grown up (Loomis, *Celtic Myth*, p. 351). There are traces of mythology in many Arthurian tales. The theory that Arthurian legend is solely mythological in origin is, however, no longer prevalent. Research into early medieval Britain seems to point to a historical basis for Arthur.

In addition to the mythological elements of Arthurian legend, it has blended with existing folklore. In some cases general folklore is incorporated into it, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* being a case in point. In many accounts Arthur encounters fairies, dragons, giants and other folkloric creatures. The opposite is also true. Arthur and his companions have come to feature in existing folk-tales and popular lore. Roberts claims that although it is clear that Arthur, Guinevere, Bedivere and Gawain were popular in folklore, it is “debatable...whether this Arthurian lore was so many individual pieces or whether they existed within a legendary frame”.⁴⁹ Arthurian legend as we know it might be a mixture of elements, motifs, characters and character traits from older tales and beliefs which have come to be connected with Arthur after he became a famous legendary character. Darrah claims that

⁴⁷ Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (Columbia: University Press, 1927).

⁴⁸ Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), p. 16.

⁴⁹ Brynley F. Roberts, “Arthurian Lore” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow. *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Beliefs, and Customs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 26.

“Guenever [sic], Gawain and Lancelot, to take but a few, have obviously attracted incidents from other heroes and heroines, now forgotten, and from other cycles” (Darrah, p. 213).

One example of Arthur being incorporated into existing folklore is the tradition that regards him as the leader of the Wild Hunt, a ghostly pack of dogs or group of men, sometimes believed to be the souls of the dead.⁵⁰ The motif is analogous to the Norse Oskoreia, said to be led by Odin and fly over the earth on particular days to take people away with them.⁵¹ The legend was probably brought to Britain by the Vikings, and has come to be adapted to suit British folklore. It is sometimes said to be led by Gwynn ap Nudd, the Celtic King of the Otherworld, and in other traditions by Arthur. In France it is called the *Chasse Artu*, the Arthurian Hunt.⁵² Arthur and his men are also said to ride “along Hunting Causeway from Cadbury Castle to Glastonbury” (Palmer, p. 83) on Christmas Eve (Palmer, p. 83) and on 24 June, St. John the Baptist’s Day (Palmer, p. 160), two places connected with Arthurian legend. Cadbury Castle is one of the suggested locations for Camelot,⁵³ while Avalon is identified with Glastonbury.⁵⁴ They are “invisible, except for the glint of his silver horse shoes, though the sounds have been heard by many” (p. 83). Gervase of Tilbury states that companies of men also ride “in the woods both of Greater and Lesser Britain” (Chambers, p. 228) who declare “themselves to be of Arthur’s household” (Chambers, p. 228) when questioned. The British folklorist Katharine

⁵⁰ E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd., 1927), p. 206.

⁵¹ John Lindow, “Wild Hunt”, in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 432.

⁵² Roger Sherman Loomis, “The Legend of Arthur’s Survival” in Roger Sherman Loomis, editor, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 70.

⁵³ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), p. 61.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur’s Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury*, second edition (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd., 1973).

Briggs recounts several folk-tales featuring Arthur in her *British Folk-Tales and Legends*.⁵⁵ In one he challenges Saint Caradoc to fight a dragon (Briggs, p. 169). In another he and Guinevere are giants (Briggs, p. 281).

Specifically Arthurian folklore is also common. All over the Celtic parts of Britain, there are place names connected with Arthurian characters (Lacy and Ashe, p. 18), more than 150 altogether.⁵⁶ Ashe states that this frequency is “proof of [Arthur’s] fame” (Ashe, *The Mythology*, p. 257). That they are all on the “Celtic Fringe” (Lacy and Ashe, p. 18) implies that they are rooted “in the senior and elusive Arthurian saga” (Ashe, p. 257), rather than in the romances, where the setting is usually the English parts of Britain (Ashe, p. 257). Often Arthurian folklore is connected to such places, sometimes in the shape of onomastic tales, i.e. tales intended to explain place names. For instance, Nennius claims that Carn Cabal, a stone on a cairn above the Wye Valley in Builth in Wales is named after Arthur’s dog and bears its footprint (Lindahl *et al*, p. 24). Nennius writes that “[w]hen Cabal, the dog of Arthur the soldier, was hunting the boar Troynt, he impressed his print in the stone”.⁵⁷ The boar hunting episode referred to is recounted in “Kilhwch and Olwen” from *The Mabinogion* (Guest, pp. 79-111).

This not only illustrates the onomastic function of legendary figures; the allegation that his dog is supposed to have left its footprint in solid stone also suggests the supernatural size and strength attributed to Arthurian characters. In folklore Arthur “is sometimes not so much a medieval monarch as a sort of titan” (Lacy and Ashe, p. 18). In “The Dream of Rhonabwy”, a tale from *The Mabinogion*, the tales in which probably build on oral tradition, Arthur says he feels “sad [...] that

⁵⁵ Katharine Mary Briggs, *British Folk-Tales and Legends: A Sampler* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002)

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Ashe, *Mythology of the British Isles*, second edition (London: Methuen, 2002), p.257.

⁵⁷ Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, quoted in Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur’s Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury*, second edition (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd., 1973), pp. 73-74.

men of such stature as these should have this Island in their keeping, after the men that guarded it of yore” (Guest, p. 117). The Golden Age of the Britons is depicted as lying far back in an almost legendary past – before the Romans – even at Arthur’s time; and his comment about their stature suggests that they were not only mightier, but larger. Several geographical landmarks that bear Arthur’s name suggest the same, for instance, “four hills are called Arthur’s seat” (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 254).

The most “persistent folklore theme” (Lacy and Ashe, p. 18) in Arthurian legend is the passing of Arthur. Geoffrey is the first to claim that he is brought to Avalon. This tradition has remained common in Arthurian literature. Avalon is apparently an aspect of the Otherworld or Fairyland. Briggs states that “Avalon, the Isle of the Apples, was the name of the Paradise or Fairyland into which Arthur disappeared. If it was Glastonbury it was nonetheless Fairyland”.⁵⁸ Geoffrey says nothing about its location or nature or of the future return of the King in his *History*, but writes: “Arthur himself, our renowned King, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to” (Geoffrey, p. 261). In *The Life of Merlin* he is more elaborate. The bard Taliesin claims that the wounded Arthur was taken to “the island of apples which men call ‘The Fortunate Isle’”. Nine sisters preside over the island, and their leader is Morgen (presumably Morgan le Fay), who claims that she can heal him.⁵⁹ The nine sisters echo “the nine maidens”⁶⁰ whose breath kindled the cauldron of the chief of Annwn (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 225), implying that Avalon is an aspect of the Celtic Otherworld.

In Layamon’s account Avalon is apparently identical with Fairyland. He states that “[t]he Britons believe that he is alive, and dwelleth in Avalun [sic] with the

⁵⁸ Katharine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 100.

⁵⁹ *The Life of Merlin*, at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/vm/vmeng.htm>

⁶⁰ “The Spoils of Annwn” at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/annwn.htm>

fairest of all elves; and the Britons even yet expect when Arthur shall return”.⁶¹ This is a major embellishment of the simple statement in the *Easter Annals* that “Arthur and Medrawt perished” (Castleden, p.1) and openly alludes to folklore about the subject. There is even a tradition that holds that Arthur is not only carried to Fairyland after his death, but that he comes from there as well, as otherworldly aid to the Britons (Evans-Wentz, pp. 309-324). The medieval poet Lydgate calls Arthur “a King crowned [sic] in Faerie”.⁶² The Celtic countries have a strong tradition of fairy-faith. Their fairies are not the tiny, winged beings of Victorian art and folklore, but often of human size. While the notion of a fairy Arthur is difficult to reconcile with the idea of Arthur as a Christian King, it is certainly the kind of tradition one would expect as a natural consequence of oral transmission and fanciful embroidery of a legend.

Malory chose to name his epic *Le Morte d'Arthur* although only a few pages out of a thousand deal with his passing, because Arthur is doomed to fail because of his relationship with Morgause and the resulting birth of Mordred. Malory is remarkably sparse on the event for which his book is named, merely stating that “some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu [passed] into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross (...) many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: HIC IACET ARTHURUS; REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS”⁶³ (‘here lies Arthur, the once and future king’). Malory does, then, claim that a tomb, a “grave for Arthur”, exists. The statement “some men say in many parts

⁶¹ Layamon, quoted in Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), p. 324.

⁶² Thomas Lydgate, quoted in Lady Charlotte Guest, translator, *The Mabinogion* (London: Voyager, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), p. 286.

⁶³ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, volume ii, editor Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 519.

of England that King Arthur is not dead”, however, shows that local folklore claims otherwise. So does the inscription on the tomb, which implies Arthur’s future return.

The quote from “Stanzas of the Graves” at the beginning of this paper implies that the myth that Arthur is not dead is one of the original elements of the legend. The poem is echoed by William of Malmesbury, who observed in 1125 that “Arthur’s tomb is nowhere beheld, so that ancient songs fable he is still to come”.⁶⁴ The myth of the return of the King is compatible with both folkloric and Christian tradition. In the former, Arthur returns to where he came from when he passes into the Otherworld and might well return one day. Immortality is a common trait of the faerie folk. Arthur is a saviour figure and in the notion that he is not dead there are also connotations of the resurrection of Christ.

In the 1190s, a male and a female skeleton were exhumed at Glastonbury Abbey. Henry II claimed that they were Arthur and Guinevere. This is, of course, impossible to prove. Arthur’s skeleton was extraordinarily large.⁶⁵ Castleden suggests that Henry II arranged for the exhumation of the Glastonbury grave to convince the Britons that Arthur was dead and would not be returning to save them, suggesting how persistent the folklore surrounding his death and expected return had become. Lacy mentions a ceremony in the thirteenth century “during which the bodies were displayed as one might display the holiest of relics”.⁶⁶ Its aim was to establish the Plantagenet king Edward I as Arthur’s legitimate successor. Even kings of Norman origin wished to trace their genealogies back to Arthur to gain credibility. Castleden suggests that the mystery surrounding the passing of Arthur may be rooted in his being badly wounded at Camlann and taken away to be healed. He may have

⁶⁴ William of Malmesbury, quoted in Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988), p. 37.

⁶⁵ Kingsley Palmer, *The Folklore of Somerset* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976), p. 127.

⁶⁶ Norris J. Lacy, “Arthur” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 22.

survived; and it would be natural for people to hope that he would return, a belief which evolved into the legend of the King who will rule again (Castleden, p. 213).

The Avalon tradition also exists in folklore, but there are other traditions as well. In Cornish folklore Arthur's soul resides in a bird (Evans-Wentz, p. 183). The most common tradition claims that Arthur sleeps in a cave somewhere in Britain, often with a retinue. The first to document this tradition about Arthur is Gervase of Tilbury, who claims that Arthur sleeps inside Mount Etna, Sicily (Chambers, p. 221). Henken states that "attestations to British belief in the king's survival and eventual return occur repeatedly in twelfth-century English and French texts" (Lindahl *et al*, p. 389), implying that the belief was alive in oral folklore before it was documented. Cadbury Hill in Somerset (Palmer, p. 124), Craig-y-Dinas in south Wales (Lindahl *et al*, p. 389), "a cairn on the pass called Bwlch y Saethau" (Chambers, p. 223), the vaults under the Castle of Sewingshields in Northumberland (Chambers, p. 224), and the Eildon Hills (Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, p. 99) are among his alleged resting places. The cave stories "have a curious uniformity about them, although some come from mediaeval [sic] legend and others from more recent folk-belief" (Chambers, p. 221). This motif has, the, apparently survived in much the same form for a long time.

The cave sleeper motif is originally pre-Christian. Plutarch states that "[t]here is, men said, an island [near Britain] in which Kronos is imprisoned with Briareus keeping guard over him as he sleeps, for, as they put it, sleep is the bond forged for Kronos".⁶⁷ This is apparently the source of both the Avalon and cave traditions (Lacy and Ashe, pp. 37-38). The folklorist Jennifer Westwood claims that the fact that Arthur features in cave legends might help verify the historicity of Arthur.⁶⁸ In

⁶⁷ Plutarch, *De defectu Oraculorum*, xviii, quoted in E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1927), p. 230.

⁶⁸ Geoffrey Ashe, "The Origins of Arthurian Legend" in *Arthuriana* 5.3 (Fall 1995), at <http://faculty.smu.edu/bwheeler/ARTHUR/ashe.pdf>, p. 8.

Christian times, “cave-legends do not attach themselves to fairy-tale characters: the sleepers are, or are regarded as, human beings in a historical context” (Ashe, “The Origins”, p. 8). John Rhys suggests that Celtic cave legends “have combined two sets of popular belief once distinct, the one referring to the hero gone to the world of the fairies and expected someday to return, and the other to a hero or god enjoying an enchanted sleep with his retinue all around him”.⁶⁹ Cave legends echo the notion that hollow hills are entrances to the Otherworld (Chambers, p. 221).

The above are only a handful of examples of Arthurian folklore and of the incorporation of Arthurian characters in existing folklore. In the following chapters I will examine more examples, within the framework of three literary works. I will also look at the use of more general folklore in Arthurian literature.

⁶⁹ John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, volume ii, at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/cfwm/cf202.htm>

Chapter 2

“The land was full of life”⁷⁰: Folklore in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*

Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poetic cycle *Idylls of the King* was written and published between 1856 and 1874. The finished work consists of twelve long narrative poems, the framework for which is the life and reign of Arthur. Its chief sources are Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* and *The Mabinogion*. Tennyson was Poet Laureate when it was written, and in “To the Queen”, the postscript to *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson asks the Queen to “accept this old imperfect tale,/new-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,/Ideal manhood closed in real man”.⁷¹ Tennyson’s chief objects are to emphasize the symbolism of Arthurian legend and “to teach men the need of the ideal”.⁷² In *Idylls of the King* Arthur has not even unwittingly committed the sin of incest; he is Mordred’s uncle, and has no direct hand in the fall of Camelot. As Hair states, “Tennyson’s concept of Arthur as ‘the blameless king’ apparently did not change during the long period of composition of the *Idylls*” (Hair, p. 129). Walter Houghton describes the emphasis the Victorians put upon heroism.⁷³ Arthur would be a suitable character to represent desirable values at the time of Tennyson’s composition, since he is a well-known hero and has, despite his Welsh origin, come to be regarded as an arch-English legendary figure. England does not quite have a coherent mythology of its own. Despite the Welsh origin of Arthurian legend,

⁷⁰ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 275, l. 257.

⁷¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 302, ll. 36-38.

⁷² Donald S. Hair, *Domestic and Heroic in Tennyson’s Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 137.

⁷³ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 305-340.

however, this has come to be considered by many as an English body of legendary material.

Tennyson asks the Queen to accept his Arthur rather than that of Geoffrey and Malory (Tennyson, p. 302, ll.36-42). He feels that their conceptions of Arthur are too strongly characterized by medieval issues to function as useful ideals for the Victorians, describing them as “[t]ouch’d by the adulterous finger of a time/That hover’d between war and wantonness,/And crownings and dethronements” (p. 302, ll. 43-45). Tennyson’s version suits and is influenced by his contemporary cultural environment. Tennyson is more interested in the spiritual aspect of Arthurian legend than in war and politics. He asks the Queen to accept *Idylls of the King* rather than the Arthur of folklore, “that gray [sic] king, whose name, a ghost,/Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,/And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still” (p. 302, ll. 39-41). Even so, he does occasionally draw on folkloristic sources. In this chapter, I will look at some instances where Tennyson uses folklore in *Idylls of the King* and elaborate on the importance and effect of his use of such elements.

Tennyson lived and wrote during the Victorian period. Most of his contemporaries viewed nature as something that should be tamed and ruled by human beings. They desired order, and untamed wilderness was perceived as threatening. This is implied in “The Coming of Arthur”. Britain is harried by civil war among petty kings who refuse to unite, even when faced with an external threat in the shape of “the heathen host” (Tennyson, p. 21, l. 8) which “swarmed overseas” (p. 21, l. 9). This refers to the Anglo-Saxon invaders who came to Britain from Scandinavia and the Continent. The barbarism of the Anglo-Saxons from the point of view of the British is expressed through the word “swarmed”, which has connotations of insects or other life-forms perceived as inferior to human beings. The

Anglo-Saxons leave “great tracts of wilderness” (p. 21, l. 10) in their wake. From a Victorian point of view, “wilderness” will not have suggested unspoilt nature, as it might today, but rather the opposite. Britain is presented as a ravaged and dangerous country not controlled by its human inhabitants, and therefore frightening. The wild beasts that roam the woods suggest danger and savagery (p. 21, ll. 10-25).

Arthur is called upon to fight the invaders even though he has previously “done no deed of arms” (p. 22, l. 46). He succeeds in expelling them, he “drave/The heathen, slew the beast” (p. 22, ll. 58-59) and, significantly, “felled/The forest” (p. 22, ll. 59-60). The latter is done to create open spaces and areas for cultivation, which is compatible with the notion that forests are perceived as hostile and open country as controlled and thus desirable. Also, felling the forest lets the sun in. Symbolically, this refers to the Christian faith Arthur will be spreading. After the marriage of Guinevere and Arthur, people sing “Blow, for our Sun is mighty in his May!/Blow, for our Sun is mightier day by day” (p. 34, ll. 496-98). There are echoes here both of Christianity and folklore. The sun symbolizes God and the Christian religion. Tennyson’s Arthur is a Christian King. The new religion grows stronger during his reign. In many pre-Christian religions the sun itself was an object of worship. The month of May, particularly May Day, is connected with the worship of gods and spirits of nature and fertility. According to folklore, the health and fertility of the land depend on the rule of the rightful king, in this case the chosen Arthur. Everything the sun symbolizes is realised, if only for a time, during Arthur’s reign.

Folklore tends to depict Arthur as more than an ordinary man. In Tennyson his extraordinary abilities are mainly due to the fact that he is chosen by God to lead the Britons, he is “the King/In whom high God hath breathed a secret thing” (p. 34, ll. 499-500). Folklore about him rises because of the notion that he is not quite of this

world, as we shall see below. He also receives help people who are originally connected to pre-Christian religion. While Tennyson leaves out the scene with the sword in the stone, Excalibur is still the artefact “[w]hereby to drive the heathen out” (p. 28, l. 286). According to tradition Excalibur would always draw blood when it was drawn and its scabbard would prevent he who carried it from losing blood, no matter how gravely he was wounded.⁷⁴ It is, in effect, a magic weapon. Arthur gets it from the Lady of the Lake, whom Geoffrey Ashe says has “Otherworld aspects, and was perhaps originally a Celtic priestess”.⁷⁵ Even during his coronation, which takes place in a minster, there are echoes of an older religion. The face of the Lady of the Lake is almost “hidden in the minster gloom” (p. 28, l. 288), implying that paganism is gradually replaced by Christianity. She is still powerful, though. She is not an ordinary human being, but dwells in the lake (p. 28, ll. 290-91) and is, surprisingly, credited with the ability “to walk the waters like our Lord” (p. 29, l. 293).

Three queens, “the friends/Of Arthur...Who will help him at his need” (p. 28, ll. 275-76 and l. 278), are also present at the crowning. At least one of these is connected to the Otherworld, or Fairyland, namely Arthur’s sister Morgan le Fay, whose name is French for Morgan the Fairy. Apart from her presence as a guardian of Arthur she plays no significant role in *Idylls of the King*. In some accounts she is actually a fairy, linking Arthur to Fairyland by family association, in others, for instance in Malory, she is an enchantress, a woman with magical powers. In the three queens there are aspects both of the pagan Triple Goddess and of the Holy Trinity.

Tennyson begins the story *in medias res*; the account of Arthur’s birth is told in retrospect. In “The Coming of Arthur” Bedivere mentions the traditional story of Uther and Igraine (pp. 26-27, ll. 177-236), though Uther does not magically take on

⁷⁴ Helen Cooper, “The Supernatural” in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), p. 278.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Ashe, *Mythology of the British Isles*, second edition (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 207.

the appearance of Igraine's husband, Gorlois, in his account. The notion that Arthur was conceived in Tintagel Castle on the Cornish coast is mentioned by Geoffrey, but appears to be a pre-Galfridian folklore tradition (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 188). Remains of a "settlement that appears to date from the Arthurian period"⁷⁶ has been found at Tintagel, and Ashe hypothesises that "[a] tradition of this settlement" (Braswell and Bugge, p. 18) probably underlies the tradition of Arthur's conception there (the castle is from a later period). Tennyson wishes "to get rid of Uther's scandalous exploit but keep its Cornish scene" (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 188), apparently to maintain the connection with folklore. He also provides the reader with an alternative and even more mysterious story, told by Arthur's sister Bellicent.⁷⁷ She "does not claim truth" (Hair, p. 131) for her account; it is rather "a supposition, a symbolic narrative" (Hair, p. 131). This corresponds with Tennyson's emphasis on the symbolic aspects of Arthurian legend. At the same time, there are traces of folklore in Bellicent's tale.

Bleys and Merlin have a vision of a great, dragon-winged ship. They walk down to the beach. Waves roll in, and the ninth wave bursts into a flame from which is "borne/A naked babe" (Tennyson, p. 31, l. 383). Since this takes place on the night when Uther dies, the boy is proclaimed "'an heir for Uther'" (p. 31, l. 385). The number nine is believed to have magical properties in folklore, and there are nine orders of angels in Christianity. The ship on which Arthur is brought into the world is "[b]right with a shining people on the decks" (p. 31, l. 375). "[S]hining people" suggests a race different from our own. There are echoes here both of angels and of fairies, with whom many legends associate Arthur. According to Layamon, "so soon as [Arthur] came on earth, elves took him, they enchanted the child with magic most

⁷⁶ Geoffrey Ashe, "The Convergence of Arthurian Studies", in Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge, editors, *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), p. 18.

⁷⁷ Bellicent has the role traditionally ascribed to Morgause: She is Mordred's mother. In *Idylls of the King* Mordred is not Arthur's son, but his nephew. Tennyson leaves out the incest theme altogether.

strong”.⁷⁸ Tennyson quotes Layamon’s sequence about Arthur’s dealings with the elves in his introduction to the first *Idylls* (Tennyson, pp. 305-6). Although Bellicent’s account may not be true even within the context of *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson does address the tradition of Arthur as more than human, either a heavenly being or a fairy, by including it.

When confronted with whether Bellicent’s tale represents the truth about Arthur’s origin, Merlin talks in riddles and concludes by saying “[f]rom the great deep to the great deep [Arthur] goes” (p. 32, l. 410), implying that what comes before and after Arthur’s life and reign on earth are unfathomable mysteries. What people should focus on is Arthur’s time here. “From the great deep to the great deep he goes” echoes Bede, who compares the human lifespan to a sparrow flying through the door into the light and heat of a great hall from the darkness outside. It flutters there for a little while, before flying out through another door and disappearing into the darkness from whence it came.⁷⁹ Merlin’s riddle suggests that what precedes and follows life are unknown. In the case of Arthur it is particularly apt, since his birth and death are both surrounded by mystery and contradictions. Merlin’s “riddling triplets of old time” (p. 31, l. 401) echo the triads, which were presumably composed by and for the benefit of bards. Related pieces of information are put together in groups of three in order to facilitate memory regarding legendary and folkloric material which was often used in the making of stories and songs. According to some traditions, Merlin was a Celtic bard if he ever existed as a historical person.⁸⁰ Also,

⁷⁸ Layamon, *Brut*, editor Madden, volume ii, p. 384. Quoted in Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 305-306.

⁷⁹ Bede, “The Conversion of Northumbria” from *The Ecclesiastical History of the British People*, quoted in Norman Davis, editor, *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Primer*, ninth edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 91.

⁸⁰ Brynley F. Roberts, “Myrddin” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.282.

riddles are common in oral tradition all over the world.⁸¹ Tennyson's Merlin appears to possess knowledge, possibly of a supernatural nature, that he does not wish to disclose. This is suitable for a person who has come to be perceived as a wizard.

Bellicent predicts Arthur's importance and popularity among authors and people in general. "[G]reat bards of him will sing/Hereafter" (p. 32, ll. 413-14), she says, and old sayings will be "echo'd by old folk beside their fires/For comfort after their wage-work is done,/Speak of the King" (p. 32, l. 416-17). Arthur will be embraced not only by writers and literate people, but by "common people". He will pass into tales and folklore as well as the literary works which were chiefly available to the privileged. People will echo old sayings and, as is typical with orally transmitted material, add new elements. That they will speak of him for comfort suggests that the legend of Arthur represents victory and hope for the Britons. Shaw states that "through the centuries, King Arthur [has] been regarded with quasi-religious enthusiasm".⁸²

There are also connotations of the resurrection of Christ in the notion that Arthur will return from the realm of the dead and, in the words of Malory, "win the Holy Cross".⁸³ Tennyson treats Arthur's demise at length in "The Passing of Arthur", on which I will elaborate below. He also addresses it in "The Coming of Arthur". Bellicent states that Merlin has predicted that even if Arthur is wounded, "he will not die,/ But pass, again to come; and then or now/ Utterly smite the heathen underfoot,/ Till these and all men hail him for their king" (p. 32, l. 420-23). "Then or now" suggests that Arthur has the potential to permanently expel the invaders from Britain

⁸¹ Andrew Welsh, "Riddle" in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 339.

⁸² Tony Deane and Tony Shaw, *The Folklore of Cornwall* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1975), p. 26.

⁸³ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, volume ii, editor Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 519.

and create a united nation that is strong enough to withstand future attempts at conquest. Apparently, this requires all the British to agree to unite under him and for his knights and wife to remain faithful. Tennyson and his readers know this will not happen this time around. Internal disloyalty and strife destroy the Round Table. A significant aspect of writing about Arthur is that most readers know the basic outline of the story. Each writer must add elements or interpret and emphasize existing ones in such a way as to maintain interest and, to a degree, relevance. It is possible to do this and still be true to the legend because there are so many traditions and tales from which to choose elements.

Significantly, as Hair points out, most of the episodes in *Idylls of the King* which contain supernatural or folkloric elements and are “by the standards of realism, the most improbable” (Hair, p. 129), are narrated not in the first person by the general narrator (Tennyson), but by some character within the story (Hair, p. 129). As I hope to show below, this is true throughout *Idylls of the King*. I will elaborate on its significance in the conclusion of this chapter. Tennyson’s chief inspiration is Malory, who omits most of the non-realistic elements of his sources; “he has tended to leave out the inexplicable”.⁸⁴ But Tennyson is influenced by *The Mabinogion* as well, and he is clearly familiar with both the literary and folkloric Arthurian tradition, as will be seen below. He does include folklore, but usually expresses it through characters within *Idylls of the King* as tales and beliefs about Arthur, rather than as part of the storyline (with the exception of Arthur’s death).

Katharine Briggs claims that “in the earlier tradition on which [Malory] drew it is probable that Arthur and all his family were supernatural”.⁸⁵ Although this may be an overstatement, the connection between Arthur and Fairyland is present in many

⁸⁴ John Darrah, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), p. 117.

⁸⁵ Katharine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 169.

accounts, and Tennyson does address it. As Arthur's nephew Gareth approaches Camelot with a retinue of men in "Gareth and Lynette", one of the men claims that "[h]ere is a city of Enchanters, built/By fairy kings" (Tennyson, p. 41, ll. 196-97). It is rumoured that "this King is not the King,/But only changeling out of Fairyland" (p. 41, ll. 200-201). According to folklore, fairies sometimes steal a mortal child and replace it with one of their own – a changeling. The changeling imagery is also used in "The Coming of Arthur". Bellicent says that Bleys lay "shrunk like a fairy changeling" (p. 30, l. 362). Those who accuse Arthur of being a changeling are nervous about entering Camelot; and when Bleys is compared to one, he is dying, and so about to leave this world. Also, he is a magician, possessing unusual powers. In both cases, the term is used to refer to someone perceived as different and not quite of this world, and respected, but also feared. This suggests people's view of fairies and similar creatures of folklore, and that Arthur was perceived as such a creature, or at least as more than an ordinary human being. This scene presents him as a focal point for folklore even during his lifetime. In relation to Hair's observation above, it is significant that the discussion about Camelot as a city of Fairyland takes place among characters within the story, rather than being addressed by the narrator.

In "Gareth and Lynette", Merlin claims that

a Fairy King
And Fairy Queens have built the city, son;
They came out from a sacred mountain-cleft
Toward the sunrise, each with harp in hand,
And built it to the music of their harps" (p. 43, ll. 254-58).

According to folklore, fairies reside inside hollow hills and mountains. In Irish folklore mountains such as Knocknarea are the dwelling places of fairy royalty. Merlin's statement is a nod to Celtic fairy traditions. As was the case with Arthur's origin and fate, he does not claim that he speaks the truth, at least not the only truth.

Metaphorically, his statement is a nod to Arthurian literature and tales. That the city is built to music is explained by Tennyson as implying that it is “[b]uilt by the Muses” (p. 311). It is being built still (p. 43, l. 272), and “never built at all/And therefore built forever” (p. 43, ll. 273-74). According to Greek mythology, Troy was built by music, so this implicitly compares the grandeur of Camelot with that of Troy. Muses are spirits who inspire artists in Greek mythology. Here, they function as a reference to the Arthurian literary tradition. Camelot is first mentioned in de Troyes.⁸⁶ It might be a literary invention, which would metaphorically make it a city built by the Muses. That the city is both never built at all and being built forever implies that it is not historical – there may be traces of a historical person in Arthur, but Camelot is a comparatively new invention – but it continues to inspire writers and artists. As a source for stories it is seemingly inexhaustible, and not limited by the confines of reality. Merlin’s contradictory statement also suggests the multifaceted nature of Arthurian legend, which exists in many occasionally conflicting versions.

Gareth later rescues a man from being drowned in a mere. The man explains that he regularly drowns thieves in that same place by hanging a stone around their necks (p. 58, ll. 797-803). There are traces in this of old Celtic and pre-Celtic practices. Numerous bodies, victims of punishment and sacrifice, have been exhumed from bogs, especially in Denmark and Ireland. The man Gareth saves refers to himself as “cleanser of the woods” (p. 68, l. 808), echoing “The Coming of Arthur”, where the woods are cleansed of unknown and potentially dangerous creatures. He claims that at night, the bodies “let go the stone,/And rise, and flickering in a grimly light/Dance on the mere” (p. 58, ll. 805-807). Such lights

⁸⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991).

occasionally appear on marshes; they are caused by gases. This has given rise to a belief in so-called Jack-o'-lanterns or will-o'-the-wisps, spirits in the shape of pale lights that lead wanderers astray. As the man implies, they are believed to be the souls of the dead, often of wicked men (Briggs, p. 196). This fits with the notion that the drowned men are criminals and shows Tennyson's familiarity with folklore. Tennyson also mentions such spirits in "The Holy Grail". Percival says that Arthur warned the knights that most of them "would follow wandering fires" (p. 216, l. 369) in the search for the Grail, implying that they would follow something they believed to be holy but which merely led them astray.

Idylls of the King is set in the realm of Lyonesse, one of many legendary places which are said to have sunk in the sea, Atlantis being the most famous example. According to folklore, Lyonesse was part of the British mainland, situated between the Scilly Isles and Cornwall (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 231). Cornwall has a strong Arthurian connection. Lyonesse is said to have contained no less than 140 churches, which suits the Christian aspect of Arthurian legend (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 231). A legendary setting allows for more artistic freedom, both historically speaking and in regard to the otherworldly aspects that Tennyson incorporates in his *Idylls*. It removes the limits imposed by history and gives his poetry a geographical anchoring in legend. It also heightens the sense of change that comes with Arthur's death. Not only does he die and the Round Table disintegrate; the very area in which they held sway is eradicated.

In most accounts of Arthurian legend, Guinevere ends her days in a convent. In Tennyson's "Guinevere" the Queen speaks with a young novice who is unaware of Guinevere's identity. She says that according to her father, a knight of the Round Table, "[B]ritain was full of signs/And wonders ere the coming of the Queen"

(Tennyson, p. 275, ll. 230-31). She relates how her father saw mermaids and mermen, common creatures in the folklore of the Cornish coast (Deane and Shaw, p. 84). Those mentioned in “Guinevere” “sent a deep sea-voice thro’ all the land” (p. 275, l. 245), echoing the murmur of voices in the deep as Arthur was carried to the shore by a great wave several decades before. This was answered by “the little elves of chasms and cleft” (p. 275, l. 246), who “[m]ade answer sounding like a distant horn” (p. 275, l. 247) – literally echoing the “horns of Elfland faintly blowing”⁸⁷ in Tennyson’s “The Princess: The Splendor Falls on Castle Walls”.

In the novice’s tale the wildwood is not a scary place, although otherworldly beings reside there. On the contrary, her father saw “three spirits mad with joy” (Tennyson, p. 275, l. 250) in “the dim-lit woods” (p. 275, l. 249). The wildwood is frightening before Arthur arrives, but his coming creates harmony. At Camelot “merry bloated things/Shoulder’d the spigot, straddling on the butts/While the wine ran” (p. 276, ll. 265-67). Tennyson cites Thomas Crofton Croker’s *Fairy Legends and Traditions* (1825), a significant contemporary volume of fairy lore, as the source of the goblins in the wine-cellar (Tennyson, p. 364). “[T]he spirits of the hills” (p. 276, l. 281) surround a bard as he sings, suggesting an otherworldly inspiration for his music, and indeed for art in general, including tales of Arthur. “[T]he land was full of life” (p. 275, l. 257), the girl states, equalling the presence of fairies with vitality and joy. This scene affirms that “the young king’s authority over the land proceeds directly from the land itself”,⁸⁸ which echoes the mythic and folkloric notion of the link between the rule of the rightful king and the health and fertility of the land.

⁸⁷ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Selected Poems*, editor Aidan Day (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 124.

⁸⁸ Elliot L. Gilbert, “The Female King: Tennyson’s Arthurian Apocalypse” in Edward Donald Kennedy, *King Arthur: A Casebook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), p. 239.

In Celtic folklore and many medieval traditions fairies are like human beings in stature and appearance, though they surpass them in power and beauty. From Shakespeare onwards, however, more often than not they are depicted as diminutive. Even so, they are, in many traditions, believed to be mischievous and even harmful if displeased. The fairies in *Idylls of the King* are small (p. 275, l. 246) and seem connected with innocence rather than mischievousness or danger. The novice claims that they leave, or at least go into hiding and do not show themselves as often after Guinevere's adultery. As Guinevere is fleeing from Camelot to Almsbury, she hears "spirits of the waste and weald/Moan as she fled, or thought she heard them moan" (p. 272, ll. 128-29). These are possibly spirits embodying nature, suggesting that the land itself suffers at her touch. The connection between fairies and innocence is typical of the Victorian period. From being powerful beings of the same stature as humans, or potentially dangerous creatures with which one needed to maintain a good relationship, fairies came to be seen as dainty creatures, cute rather than intimidating. Diane Purkiss examines this development in her book *Troublesome Things*.⁸⁹ Tolkien states that "[t]he diminutive being, elf or fairy, is (I guess) in England largely a sophisticated product of literary fancy".⁹⁰ Briggs suggests that the decreasing size of fairies implies a diminishment of their power in the public mind.⁹¹ Tennyson does, of course, write about a period 1500 years prior to his own, but is influenced by Victorian folklore. Arthurian folklore is, as I mentioned in connection with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, generally typical of the period when it arose, rather than of the early medieval period.

⁸⁹ Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

⁹⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), p. 13.

⁹¹ Katharine Mary Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs in Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 70.

The novice's tale echoes Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale": "When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days/A King whom every Briton loves to praise,/This was a land brim-full of fairy folk".⁹² In Chaucer's tale, the Church has driven the fairies away: "the saintly charity and prayer/Of holy friars seem to have purged the air" (Chaucer, p. 281). The conflict between religion and folklore is made tangible by the Wife of Bath's wry claim that "[w]herever there was wont to walk an elf/To-day there walks the holy friar himself" (Chaucer, 281). In Tennyson's poem it is the disruptive appearance of the unfaithful Queen at Camelot that drives the fairies away: "glad were spirits and men/Before the coming of the sinful Queen" (p. 276, ll. 267-68). The time of harmony between humans and nature, personified by spirits and fairies, ends with her infidelity. Despite his emphasis on Christianity, Tennyson still uses folkloric creatures to express life and joy. On returning to Camelot after the Grail Quest,⁹³ which has caused disruption among the knights and is one of the factors which lead to the fall of Camelot, Percival says that the knights' horses stumble "[o]n heaps of ruin, hornless unicorns,/Crack'd basilisks, and splinter'd cockatrices" (p. 225, ll. 714-15). These are merely sculptures of mythic beasts, but this symbolizes the destruction of the magical and mysterious aspect of Camelot.

The novice also refers to the folklore concerning Arthur's passing. "[H]is grave should be a mystery/From all men, like his birth" (pp. 276-77, ll. 296-97), she says, echoing "Stanzas of the Graves". In "Lancelot and Elaine" the men who discover the dead Elaine as she drifts down to Camelot in her barge, wonder if she has "'come to take the King to Fairyland?/For some do hold our Arthur cannot die,/But that he passes into Fairyland'" (p. 201, ll. 1249-51). This suggests the identification of

⁹² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 281.

⁹³ The Holy Grail is a partly folkloric element of Arthurian legend in itself. I have, however, chosen not to include it in my thesis, as it is a subject so complex as to require more space than part of a chapter in order to be treated properly.

Avalon with Fairyland, and also echoes fairy-lore. Fairies used to be feared, because they were believed to have the power to lure people into their own realm. Elaine is compared to “the Fairy Queen” (p. 241, l. 1247), partly because of her beauty, but also because they are scared of her. Like Bleys, who is compared to a changeling when he is dying, Elaine is no longer of this earth; she is dead and has passed on into the unknown. Many traditions equate fairies with the dead (Briggs, *the Fairies*, p. 170). Earlier in the poem Elaine wails because of her unrequited love for Lancelot. Her brothers mistake her for “the Phantom of the house/That ever shrieks before a death” (p. 194, ll. 1015-16). In Irish folklore, spirits that haunt particular houses or families are called banshees and are feared because their screams are portents of death.⁹⁴ Here Tennyson uses folklore to suggest that Elaine’s grief and extreme expression of emotions disturb her brothers to the point where they mistake her for something not human.

There are numerous other references to folklore throughout *Idylls of the King*. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the Green Knight’s home is “a worn barrow” that “with grass in green patches was grown all over,/and was all hollow within...With herbs overgrown”.⁹⁵ It is a hollow hill created by an ancient barrow. In Tennyson, Pellam’s castle is reminiscent of the home of the Green Knight. Malory gives no details of the exterior of the castle.⁹⁶ Tennyson states that it is

lichen-bearded, grayly draped
With streaming grass, appear’d, low-built but strong;
The ruinous donjon as a knoll of moss,
The battlement overtopped with ivytods,
A home of bats, in every tower an owl. (pp. 133-34, ll. 327-31)

⁹⁴ Katharine Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare’s Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 184.

⁹⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, translator, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, editor Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 83.

⁹⁶ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, volume one, editor Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 82-82.

Pellam's castle seems to have reverted to nature; it is reminiscent of a fairy knoll rather than a human construction.

In "Balin and Balan" a story is told about a "demon in the woods/Was once a man" (p. 128, ll. 121-22). This is apparently a hermit who was perceived as evil and reputedly became a demon after his death. There are echoes in this of the wild man of the woods, a popular figure from medieval folklore.⁹⁷ In "The Coming of Arthur" Tennyson describes how men were sometimes suckled and reared by wolves, and grew to become worse than their lupine mothers (pp. 21-22, ll. 27-33). Such wild men presumably express people's fear of unknown and uncontrollable forces of the mind and of nature. The wild man myth is particularly relevant in connection with Lancelot and Merlin. I will expand on this in the next two chapters.

In "Merlin and the Gleam", an autobiographical poem which is not part of *Idylls of the King*, Merlin represents the poet and the mysterious gleam inspiration. The gleam, Tennyson's inspiration, flies over different landscapes and observes "[e]lf of the woodland,/Gnome of the cavern,/Griffin and giant,/And dancing of fairies",⁹⁸ suggesting that these folkloric creatures are an important part of Tennyson's frame of reference and a source of inspiration. It takes the poet "at length/To the city and palace/Of Arthur the king". Like in the *Idylls*, the Arthur of "Merlin and the Gleam" is "Arthur the blameless" and the king "who cannot die".

In the last poem in Tennyson's cycle, "The Passing of Arthur", the most prominent folklore theme of Arthurian legend is treated. Bedivere relates the story (p. 288, ll. 1-5). Tennyson adds symbolism to Arthur's last battle as he allows it to take place on the last day of the year instead of in summer, as it does in Malory. It is

⁹⁷ Malcolm Jones, "Wild Man" in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 433-35.

⁹⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Merlin and the Gleam", at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/merl&glm.htm>

set in Lyonesse, in the West, where the sun sets (Hair, p. 123). The words “[t]he old order changeth, yielding place to new” (p. 299, l. 408) are repeated. In “The Coming of Arthur” they signify that Arthur’s reign will be peaceful and civilized in contrast to the preceding years of Saxon invasions and internal strife. The tables have turned in “The Passing of Arthur”. Arthur’s realm is disintegrating, and with it the rule of the Britons and the Christian religion. It is the last day not only of the year, or of Arthur’s life on earth, but of an era. Arthur leaves no heir, so the line of kingship is broken; and without Arthur to unite and lead the Britons, the prevalence of the Anglo-Saxons is unavoidable. When Bedivere carries the mortally wounded Arthur away from the battlefield, the chapel to which he takes him is “a broken chancel with a broken cross” (p. 292, l. 177), signifying the decline of Christianity in Britain.

As he prepares for battle, Arthur is aware that this will mark the end of his reign, but not his life: “I pass but shall not die”, he states. The deceased Gawain tells him in a dream that “to-morrow thou shalt pass away./Farewell! There is an isle of rest for thee” (p. 289, ll. 34-35). Arthur is uncertain whether the voice was that of Gawain or whether “all that haunts the waste and wild/Mourn, knowing it will go along with me?” (pp. 48-49, ll. 48-49). Echoing the novice’s tale in “Guinevere”, this underscores how the presence of spirits and fairies is connected to Arthur’s reign and a united and peaceful Britain. The spirits and fairies have withdrawn from the wine-cellars of Camelot and now only haunt “the waste and wild”. With Arthur’s passing, they may disappear altogether. Tennyson implies that on a spiritual level, the world will be a less magical place without Arthur. On a historical level, the British will fall under Anglo-Saxon subjection and a lot of their beliefs, traditions and folklore will be lost in the process. The invasion of a new people will always include the introduction of new customs and beliefs, usually at the expense of existing ones.

The Arthurian tradition has, however, survived later invasions, both in folklore and literature. Tennyson refers to this in "The Passing of Arthur". Bedivere tells him to "let pass whatever will,/Elves, and the harmless glamour of the field" (p. 289, ll. 51-52). Tennyson explains this as "[t]he legends which cluster round the king's name" (p. 366). Bedivere predicts that "in their stead thy name and glory cling/To all high places like a golden cloud/For ever" (p. 289, l. 53-54). Much folklore will be forgotten, but the tales about Arthur will prevail. His reign is about to fall, but in one sense, the story of Arthur has just begun. He will inspire a new body of legends. And not all "the harmless glamour" will pass and be forgotten; Arthur will be endowed with superhuman abilities in folklore.

In legendary Lyonesse, "fragments of forgotten peoples" (p. 290, l. 85) dwell. "Perhaps old Celts" (p. 366), remarks Tennyson; but in the "fragments of forgotten people" there are also echoes of the fairy folk. One folkloric theory about the origin of fairies is that they are "the spirits of long-dead or extinct races" (Briggs, *The Fairies*, p. 170). As Bedivere leaves the chapel where Arthur lies to throw away Excalibur, he walks through a "place of tombs,/Where lay the mighty bones of ancient men" (p. 293, ll. 214-15). Burial mounds and remains of buildings dating from pre-Celtic times were imagined to be the dwelling places of fairies and elves.⁹⁹

Arthur's sword Excalibur links him with the Otherworld. Once it has been returned to the Lake, three queens, presumably those who were present at Arthur's coronation, show up in "a dusky barge" (p. 298, l. 362). In "The Coming of Arthur" Arthur is said to have been carried to the shore by a ship on the sea. He is carried away less gloriously, across a lake in a barge. Merlin has told Arthur that his fate is not to die (p. 293, l. 191), but to go to Avalon and be healed of his wounds. As he is

⁹⁹ Malcolm Jones, "Burial Mounds" in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 52-53.

lying in the barge, Arthur's mind is still "clouded with a doubt" (p. 299, l. 426). After the barge has disappeared from sight, Bedivere is reminded of Merlin's words, "[f]rom the great dead to the great deep he goes" (p. 300, l. 445).

As Bedivere leaves the shore,

from the dawn it seem'd there came, but faint
As from beyond the limit of the world,
Like the last echo born of a great cry,
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
Around a king returning from his wars (p. 300. ll. 457-61).

What takes place here is not elaborated on, and could be interpreted in different ways. In the "great cry" "from the dawn" (p. 300, l. 459 and 457) there are connotations of birth, of a painful new beginning. The sun rises on a different world than the one it set on. The sunrise brings not only "the new year" (p. 300, l. 469), but a new age. The "fair city" (p. 300, l. 460) might be a heavenly city to which Arthur has ascended. Alternatively, what Bedivere hears may be interpreted as Arthur's unequivocal welcome back into Fairyland from whence he came as a child. He returns home – to Heaven or Fairyland – "from his wars" (p. 300, l. 461), which he was sent into the mortal world to fight. Although the attempt to unite Britain against invaders was unsuccessful, he may have a chance to return in the future and once again fight for the Britons. In the meantime, Bedivere imagines him as "King among the dead" (p. 300, l. 449). This echoes the traditions that identify fairies with the dead. In many legends, the boundary between the realm of the dead and Fairyland is fleeting, not to say non-existent. In "Pwyll Prince of Dyved" in the *Mabinogion*, Arawn is both the King of the fairies and Pen Annwn, that is, King (literally Head) of Annwn, the Celtic Otherworld.¹⁰⁰ Arawn also echoes Arthur (or vice versa) in that he

¹⁰⁰ Lady Charlotte Guest, translator, *The Mabinogion* (London: Voyager, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), p. 4.

is, in Welsh folklore, identified with the Wild Hunt.¹⁰¹ “And after healing of his grievous wound/He comes again” (p. 300, ll. 450-51), Bedivere states. He is the only survivor of the battle, and the one to tell the story to others later. He will help spread the hope that Arthur will return, giving rise to a major tradition.

In “The Passing of Arthur”, Tennyson describes Avalon as a place

where falls not rain or hail, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow’d, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crown’d with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound. (p. 299, ll. 428-32)

He also intended to include a description of Avalon in “Lancelot and Elaine”, but his editor insisted that he cut it.¹⁰² Here, he explicitly identifies Avalon with Fairyland:

And what is Avalon? Avalon is an isle
All made of apple-blossoms in the West,
And all the waves are fragrant and the fairies live upon it
And there are those that have seen it far away
Shine like a rose upon the summer sea
And thither goes the king and thence returns
And reigns: Some hold he cannot die (Levi, p. 242).

Levi states that the Avalon described here is “a version of the happy isles, part of ancient folk religion” (p. 242). The statement that he *cannot* die might suggest both that he is immortal and thus literally cannot die, and that his death would cause the Britons to despair. In his long poem *Artorius* the British poet John Heath-Stubbs echoes “Stanzas of the Graves”. “Not wise the thought, a grave for Arthur”,¹⁰³ he writes. This suggests that a grave, which would imply that Arthur’s death is an irrevocable fact, would be a bad thing; it would cause the demise of an important source of hope.

¹⁰¹ Roger Sherman Loomis, “The Legend of Arthur’s Survival” in Roger Sherman Loomis, editor, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 536.

¹⁰² Peter Levi, *Tennyson* (London: MacMillan, 1993), p. 242.

¹⁰³ John Heath-Stubbs, *Artorius: A heroic poem in eight books and four episodes*, revised edition (London: Enitharmon Press, 1974), p. 99.

As I mentioned above, most of the references to non-realistic elements in *Idylls of the King*, the novice's tale, the conversations in "Gareth and Lynette", the reaction of the guards who find Elaine, generally, most mentions of folkloric beliefs or creatures, are expressed by characters within the poems. The references are apparently intended to represent what people in general – in many cases, the "common people" – say about Arthur and Camelot, without necessarily having Tennyson's approval. Tennyson merely reports it; folklore does deserve some space in a comprehensive retelling of Arthurian legend, and in this way he is able to include it without confirming or dismissing its contents. In addition, the fact that many of the references to folklore are given in dialogue illustrates that oral tradition maintains folklore, but also changes it subtly with each retelling and storyteller. Using different narrators to express folkloric elements emphasizes how different people have made their mark on them.

Tennyson often uses folklore metaphorically or symbolically. This is prominent in Bellicent's account of Arthur's birth and in the notion that the presence of fairies and related creatures personify the land and represents its health and happiness. Many of the folkloric elements Tennyson uses, for instance fairies and will-o'-the-wisps, are general rather than tied specifically to Arthurian legend. Any author is influenced by the period during which he is writing to some degree, so some of the elements and motifs are probably influenced by the society and period during which he wrote. Even so, these elements function quite well within Tennyson's narrative. The folklore is not the only part of it which is influenced by the author's contemporary period. This is to be expected from most Arthurian literature, and indeed from literature in general.

Arthur's reign is a golden age for the Britons. Fairies and related creatures are often connected with the past. As such, it seems appropriate that the presence of fairies is presented as belonging to the early parts of Arthur's reign. Their benevolent presence becomes a focal point for nostalgia in the novice's tale as in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale". The fairy-faith was alive until well into the twentieth century, and possibly still is, in places; but even Chaucer, who wrote more than five hundred years ago, connects them with a long gone past. Tennyson's inclusion of them underscores the nostalgia people feel for Arthur when his reign is coming to a close, and the feeling that his passing represents the end of an era.

Although he creates a certain distance between himself and folklore and non-realistic events in *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson's inclusion of folklore does help preserve it. Also, it adds the familiar, otherworldly touch of mystery which is usually present in Arthurian legend. The readers know the story so well that it is necessary to include new elements in new retellings, and Arthurian folklore is, in my opinion, a valid element. It seems to me that a retelling of Arthurian legend completely devoid of any non-realistic elements would seem somewhat hollow, maybe even forced, since magic is an important aspect of it. This is perhaps best illustrated when it comes to the passing of Arthur. Arthurian legend is, in many ways, a tragedy. The tradition that he is not dead, but asleep, and will be granted another chance to save his people, does, however, make Arthur a symbol of hope and eventual triumph. This aspect of Arthurian legend is presumably what has made it so long-lived. It is folklore which has been the main catalyst for this belief, and indeed for Arthurian legend in general. The early Welsh tales and fragments of poems build on oral tradition; and early chroniclers such as Geoffrey also refer to oral tradition, as does Malory in regard to the passing of Arthur. Although the references to folklore in

Idylls of the King are in the background most of the time, they are relevant in that they are used to express important facts about Arthurian legend as a literary theme and the way in which the legends have been shaped and changed by various storytellers. Also, the inclusion of folklore places Tennyson's work even more firmly within the larger context of Arthurian literature and legend.

Chapter 3

"The old merry England of Gramarye"¹⁰⁴: Folklore in Terence Hansbury

White's *The Once and Future King*

Terence Hansbury White's *The Once and Future King* was first published as a single volume in 1958. It then consisted of four previously published novels. Its title comes from Malory, who claims that Arthur's grave bears the inscription "hic iacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, rexque futurus" ('here lies Arthur, the once and future King').¹⁰⁵ The first novel is *The Sword in the Stone* (1939), which tells the story of Arthur's childhood. *The Witch in the Wood*¹⁰⁶ (1940) describes Arthur's first battle and introduces the sons of Arthur's sister Morgause: Gaheris, Agravaine, Gawaine, and Gareth, all of whom later become Knights of the Round Table. *The Ill-made Knight* (1941) recounts Lancelot's story, his meeting with Elaine and the conception of their son Galahad, and his fateful relationship with Guinevere. *The Candle in the Wind*, also written in 1940, describes the last years of Arthur's reign, the Grail Quest and the fall of the Round Table. It ends on the night before Arthur's last battle. After White's death, the manuscript of a concluding story, *The Book of Merlyn*, was found among his papers and published posthumously in 1977. All five books were later published together in one volume.

White's work, which is based chiefly on Malory, is arguably "the best-known Arthurian work of the twentieth century".¹⁰⁷ White includes many elements of Arthurian legend; at more than 800 pages altogether, *The Once and Future King* is

¹⁰⁴ Terence Hansbury White, *The Once and Future King: The Complete Edition* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 143.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, volume ii, editor Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 519.

¹⁰⁶ *The Witch in the Wood* is called *The Queen of Air and Darkness* in some editions of *The Once and Future King*.

¹⁰⁷ Jennifer Goodman, *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, a division of G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), p. 99.

quite a comprehensive account. White has also added elements of his own. He pays a lot of attention to how the characters' personalities – or rather White's interpretation of them – decide their actions. He makes it clear that his book is written from a twentieth century perspective. Persons and events are described with frequent use of anachronism (Goodman, p. 99). The anachronisms are sometimes suitable and often amusing, but have also been criticised as annoying, as have his "[s]choolboy humour" and "slapstick fun" (Goodman, p. 99). *The Once and Future King* is occasionally moving, but it maintains an ironic distance to its subject matter.

White is inspired by Malory, whose account emphasizes the chivalric deeds and ideals of the late Middle Ages. Therefore, it is not so surprising that White has chosen to set *The Once and Future King* many centuries after the possible historical Arthur. His time setting is still original and somewhat surprising. Although we follow Arthur throughout the book, the time frame does not limit itself to one human lifespan. Judging from what goes on in the background, the time setting of *The Once and Future King* ranges from just after the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the fifteenth century. Before his last battle Arthur meets "Thomas of Warwick", whose surcoat has "the Malory bearings" (White, pp. 691-95). Thomas Malory was born around 1405. White's Uther Pendragon is a Norman, and the part of Britain in which the story takes place has become England. White has chosen not to set his story at a specific point in time, but rather to create a generalised picture of the late medieval period. On the whole, White's retelling stays rather faithful to Arthurian legend, despite its sometimes whimsical nature and the frequent use of irony. In this chapter, I will look at White's use of folklore in *The Once and Future King*. I will touch upon how this relates to Tennyson's use of it in *Idylls of the King*, which faithfully recounts the same legend but is a different and more solemn work.

White's "Old England" (p. 13) is a land of large forests. Not only are these forests home to "mad and wicked animals" (p. 13), but "[w]hen men themselves became wicked they took refuge there, outlaws cunning and bloody as any gorecrow, and as persecuted" (White, p. 13). This echoes Tennyson's woodlands, "great tracts of wilderness,/Wherein the beast was ever more and more,/But man was less and less".¹⁰⁸ Arthur has been taught that the Forest is home to "many terrible things" (White, p. 16) to warn him not to go in there alone, which would make sense in the case of a child who grows up next to a big forest. As it turns out, the Wild Forest contains dangers beyond the possibility of getting lost. It contains not only "wolves [that] wandered around and slavered appropriately" (p. 144), but "even a few dragons, these were small ones, who lived under stones and could hiss like a kettle" (p. 13). White mentions the realistic threat of "bands of Saxon outlaws" (p. 13) in the same paragraph as "magicians" and "strange animals not known to modern works of natural history" (p. 13). That the latter are not known to *modern* works implies that when Arthur was a child, these strange animals were part of the English fauna. The Sherwood Forest is home to "wild boars, warrantable stags, outlaws, dragons, and Purple Emperors" (p. 282). Arthur's childhood environment mirrors Arthurian legend in that it is a mixture of real and imagined elements.

One of the magicians who live in the woods is Merlin, who becomes Arthur's tutor in *The Sword in the Stone*. White explains Merlin's second sight, his prophetic powers, by saying that he lives backwards (White, p. 31). He knows what will happen in the future since he has been there to see it. In order to educate Arthur, Merlin changes him into different animals. The pacifist values he encounters in for instance the wild geese are in stark contrast to the chivalric values he has been taught

¹⁰⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 21, ll. 10-12.

to aspire to. Arthur tells one of the geese he likes fighting because “[i]t is knightly” (p. 180). She replies that he thinks so because he is a baby (p. 180). As he grows older, he begins to endorse the animals’ values. Arthur notices that “[t]here was something magical about the time and space commanded by Merlyn, for [Arthur] seemed to be passing many days and nights among the [geese], during the one spring night when he had left his body asleep under the bearskin” (p. 180). White is probably inspired by fairy folklore, according to which time passes differently in Fairyland; several days there can be mere minutes in our world and vice versa. This implies that Fairyland is a separate country, with rules and laws entirely its own.

At one point Arthur and his foster brother Kay meet the band of Saxons reputed to roam around the forest. White’s Arthur is a Norman, so the Saxons do not represent the threat of an invasion. They are the ones who have been conquered and chased from their homes. White makes Robin Hood their leader. He calls him Robin Wood, but the character is the familiar one from English folklore, living in the woods with his men and his beloved Marian. White’s use of him is an example of how arbitrary his time setting is. Robin is first mentioned in the thirteenth century and “it is not until the fourteenth century that references to Robin Hood become plentiful”.¹⁰⁹ The change of name illustrates how familiar characters of folklore often go by different names or versions of the same name. In *The Candle in the Wind*, Lancelot’s cousin wonders if Sir Gawaine’s name would have been pronounced “Cuchullain in the North” (p. 683). Cuchullain is a famous hero of Celtic mythology and folklore, known from *The Cattle-raid of Cooley*. Some of the tales told about him correspond to tales about Gawain. This suggests how similar-sounding names are sometimes identified and confused with each other, especially in

¹⁰⁹ Timothy J. Lundgren, “Robin Hood” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 346.

oral tradition; and also how different names refer to the same person in different cultures.

When Kay states that in the stories, Robin is surnamed Hood (p. 98), Little John dismisses it by saying “[a]h, them book-learning chaps. They don’t know all” (p. 98). This suggests that a written version of a tale may not always come closest to the truth or the original tale. This is worth keeping in mind in regard to Arthurian legend, some of the old elements of which have been preserved in folklore for centuries before they were written down. Certain folkloric beliefs may come closer to the truth about the possible historical Arthur than literature, for instance when it comes to geography. Kay and Arthur explain his surname to Sir Ector. “It is Wood really, like the Wood that he is the spirit of” (p. 122), Kay states; Robin is also referred to as “monarch of the forest” (p. 99). White’s Robin is an ordinary human being, but his unusual way of life has led to a belief that he is a supernatural creature, almost a deity. This echoes what may have taken place in the case of Arthur. His actions may have led to his superhuman status in folklore.

Kay and Arthur are searching for Arthur’s dog Cavall when they meet Robin. The dog and Robin’s companion Friar Tuck have been caught by Morgan le Fay. The question whether she is a human enchantress or a fairy is addressed (p. 103). Marian believes she is an enchantress, Robin that she is a fairy. Kay asks if “she is one of those people with bluebells for hats, who spend the time sitting on toadstools?” (p. 103). While this is not as blatant an anachronism as comparing a man’s whistle to that of a train (p. 116) or describing tanned people as “brown like red Indians” (p. 6), it does reflect Victorian rather than medieval fairy lore. Kay is informed that there are no such creatures, but that “[s]ome say they look like humans, like dwarfs, and others that they look ordinary, and others that they don’t look like anything at all, but

put on various shapes as the fancy takes them” (p. 104). This covers many traditions. Some claim that fairies are of human size, some that they are much smaller, and some that they are ethereal beings without a fixed shape.

White’s fairies are “the Oldest Ones of All, who lived in Britain before the Romans came here – before us Saxons, before the Old Ones¹¹⁰ themselves” (p. 104). This reflects the theory that fairies are the remnants or spirits of a people who lived in Britain in the ancient past,¹¹¹ as Tennyson alludes to: “old Celts” (Tennyson, p. 366). It is reminiscent of Irish mythology, according to which Ireland was once inhabited by the Tuatha de Daanan, a godlike race who looked like humans but who were superior to them in power and beauty. These were conquered by the first human beings who arrived in Ireland. According to tradition, they subsequently dwindled and took refuge in hollow hills, becoming *daoine sidhe*, fairies (Briggs, *The Fairies*, p. 14). White’s Robin does indeed say that the fairies “have been driven underground” (White, p. 104).

Another common element of fairy folklore that is mentioned in *The Sword in the Stone* is that fairies have no hearts. This is a recurrent theme in many folk-and-fairytales. It emphasises the sharp distinction between human beings and fairies where moral values are concerned. Robin refers to fairies as “the Good Folk” (p. 104), and corrects Arthur when he calls them fairies: “[y]ou mean the people of peace” (p. 105). Maintaining an amiable relationship with them was important. Referring to them by benevolent terms was thought to appease them.¹¹² The People of Peace is a Highland term for fairies; its Lowland equivalent is the Good Neighbours (Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck*, p. 192).

¹¹⁰ White’s Old Ones are the Gaelic people.

¹¹¹ Katharine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 170.

¹¹² Katharine Mary Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs in Shakespeare’s Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 17.

Morgan le Fay dwells deep in the wood. According to Diane Purkiss, “[i]n England, fairies are particularly associated with uncultivated ground, wilderness”.¹¹³ Morgan’s castle is made “entirely of food” (White, p. 113). White is inspired by the Old Irish poem “The Vision of Mac Conglinne” (p. 114), but in her castle there are also traces of the witch’s house in “Hansel and Gretel” (Purkiss, pp. 306-307). The castle which is supposed to be tempting is rather revolting. This is fortunate for Kay and Arthur; according to folklore, accepting food from fairies will put you under their power. Robin warns them about this (p. 108). Kay and Arthur defeat Morgan by threatening her with iron, which fairies traditionally cannot abide.¹¹⁴ White explains it by saying that “the Oldest Ones of All began in the days of flint, before iron was ever invented” (p. 108), and were driven underground by people with iron swords. This is founded on folklore and echoes the belief that fairies are remnants of conquered races.¹¹⁵ By the time when White first published his books, folklorists had done extensive research on British folklore. His description of the boys’ encounter with the fairies includes a lot of fairy folklore. In one sense, this is a positive thing; it does help preserve it. On the other hand, White seems more concerned with incorporating elements of fairy lore than with properly portraying the fairies in his own tale.

Giants are also common in Arthurian legend. They abound in British folklore in general. In several accounts, for instance in Geoffrey of Monmouth¹¹⁶ and the

¹¹³ Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 184.

¹¹⁴ Geoffrey Ashe, *Mythology of the British Isles*, second edition (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 107.

¹¹⁵ Bruford, “Trolls, Hillfolk, Finns and Picts: The Identity of the Good Neighbours in Orkney and Shetland” in Peter Narváez, editor, *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), p. 123.

¹¹⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 238-40.

alliterative poem *King Arthur's Death*,¹¹⁷ Arthur is said to have fought a giant at St. Michael's Mount. The Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is "the mightiest on middle-earth in measure of height".¹¹⁸ One hypothesis why giants are common in British folklore is its numerous standing stones and megalithic monuments such as Stonehenge. The Celts may have believed that gigantic creatures must have been involved in the fashioning of these. Another hypothesis is that the invading peoples, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans, were generally bigger in stature than the Celts, and were attributed with gigantic size in folklore. White alludes to this in *The Ill-Made Knight*: "Norman giants – who were most conveniently dealt with by cutting off their legs first, so that you could get a fair reach at their heads" (p. 456). This is surprising considering the fact that White's Arthur is a Norman. It illustrates how White incorporates elements from contradictory traditions.

Like fairies, giants and other folkloric creatures are often connected with the distant past, as I touched upon in chapter 2. A giant is referred to at the beginning of *The Sword in the Stone*; but Sir Ector states that most giants are killed when they are young (White, p. 5). After Arthur founds the Round Table, "for many years his new knights went about killing ogres, and rescuing damsels and saving poor prisoners, and trying to set the world to rights" (p. 603). Gradually, the Round Table becomes efficient at getting rid of external threats. "[A]fter twenty-one years of patient success...All the tyrannous giants were dead, all the dangerous dragons – some of which used to come down with a burr like a peregrine's stoop – had been put out of action" (p. 458). In *The Ill-Made Knight* Arthur says to Lancelot that now that their

¹¹⁷ "The Alliterative Morte d'Arthur" in Larry D. Benson, editor, *King Arthur's Death* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986), pp. 147-51.

¹¹⁸ J. R. R. Tolkien, translator, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, editor Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 21.

goal of creating a more just society has been accomplished, they are left with a great number of fighters on their hands (p. 468). He worries that this will cause strife and unrest: “[w]hile there were still giants and dragons and wicked knights of the old brigade, we could keep them occupied: we could keep them in order” (p. 468). This implies that “giants and dragons” are an integral part of Arthurian legend; but one connected with its early days. The absence of mythical creatures turns out to be a mixed blessing. Giants and dragons used to represent an external cause against which the knights could unite. In their absence, strife is kindled within the order itself.

The presence of folkloric creatures seems tied to innocence, or at least to the natural and desirable state of the land, despite the ferocious nature of some of them. Towards the end of Arthur’s days, internal strife among the knights increases. This is caused by several factors, the most important one being Mordred’s revelation of Guinevere and Lancelot’s affair. The Round Table falls as a result of the loss of innocence: Arthur’s incestuous relationship with Morgause and the adultery of the Queen and his most trusted knight. The destruction of innocence happens alongside the extermination of the creatures of folklore. Their presence is most tangible in *The Sword in the Stone*, during Arthur’s childhood. As he grows older, they fade into the background until they are more or less eradicated. This echoes *Idylls of the King*, where the fairies withdraw after Guinevere and Lancelot’s betrayal of Arthur.

The mythic beast which is most directly connected to innocence is the unicorn.¹¹⁹ In *The Sword in the Stone* it is explained that “you could never catch a unicorn without a young virgin for bait (in which case the unicorn meekly laid its white head and mother-of-pearl horn in her lap)” (p. 140). This is in accordance with folklore and foreshadows *The Witch in the Wood*, where Morgause’s four neglected

¹¹⁹ Malcolm South, editor, *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Study Guide* (New York, Westport, Connecticut, London, 1987), p. 16.

sons capture and kill a unicorn to gain their mother's attention and approval. The boys bring a girl with them and the unicorn lays its head in her lap (p. 275). The boys kill it, and in a grisly scene decapitate it and drag the head home with them. The beautiful unicorn is reduced to a "muddy, bloody, heather-mangled exhibit" (p. 280) in a scene that poignantly but not subtly illustrates the loss of innocence.

As the boys leave the Orkneys, and, symbolically, their childhood, behind,

[a]ll the Christian saints came out of their beehives to see them off. All the Fomorians, Fir Bolg, Tuatha de Danaan, Old People and others waved to them without the least suspicion from cliffs, currachs, mountains, bogs and shell-mounds. All the red deer and unicorns lined the cliffs to bid good-bye...the ogham stones and souterrains and promontory forts exhibited their pre-historic masonry in a blaze of sunlight...the glens, mountains and heather-shoulders of the most beautiful country in the world joined the general chorus – and the soul of the Gaelic world said to the boys in the loudest of fairy voices: Remember Us! (p. 330).

As is the case with the England of Arthur's childhood, the Orkneys is a place where creatures of folklore exist side by side with real ones. Its Gaelic heritage will have remained largely intact during the Middle Ages. Invasions did not influence it as much as the British mainland. As the boys leave the Orkneys to begin their adult lives in England, the part of Britain which has least left of its Gaelic heritage, the folkloric creatures of their mother country admonish them not to forget them completely. They are asked not to forget their heritage, but presumably also not to leave all their innocence behind. Significantly, the soul of the Gaelic world speaks in "the loudest of fairy voices". Innocence and trust are suggested in that everyone waves goodbye "without the least suspicion"; and harmony and a blurring of the borders between the real and the fantastic in the fact that Christian saints wish them farewell alongside mythological peoples that actually belong to Irish mythology, and unicorns alongside deer. The connection of fairies with the past, which as I mentioned appears already to have been the tendency when Chaucer wrote *The*

Canterbury Tales and stated that Britain was full of fairies when Arthur ruled, is suggested by White in this scene. Since the Orkneys are largely exempt from modern influences, they still provide fertile ground for fairies and unicorns. In calling fairies “the Oldest Ones of All” White suggests that they were the first to populate Britain, and will have been connected with the past by all later settlers.

Gaheris, Agravaine, Gawaine and Gareth are “Old Ones”, Gaels. In *The Witch in the Wood*, they visit an old woman, Mother Morlan. They want to hear stories, preferably “about the shee” (p. 151). Shee, or Sidhe, is the Gaelic word for fairies. The word sidhe is Gaelic for hill, the sidhe are the people who inhabit hollow hills. Some of the stories referred to are actual Celtic tales. The old woman’s friend Saint Toirdealbach, tells the boys that “[t]here did be fine wars in Old Ireland, but it would be about a bull or something” (p. 254), a reference to *The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*. On another occasion, they ask to hear “the story about the black arm which came down the chimney” (p. 268), a reference to a tale from *The Mabinogion*. This suggests that tales such as the latter were originally a part of oral tradition, rather than a literary invention.

In *The Candle in the Wind*, one of Guinevere’s serving women states that she “‘did hear tell that the Old Ones had fairy blood in them, through the red hair, you know’” (p. 661). This implies that the existence of fairies was taken for granted during the Middle Ages, and it was believed that they could have children with mortals. There are numerous fairy tales about marriage between a fairy and a mortal, often resulting in children.¹²⁰ The woman suggests that fairy blood causes Sir Gawaine’s fighting ability. According to Arthurian legend Gawaine gets stronger and

¹²⁰ Robin Gwyndaf, “Fairylore: Memorates and Legends from Welsh Oral Tradition” in Peter Narváez, editor, *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), pp. 160-61.

stronger until noon, after which his strength begins to wane.¹²¹ The woman claims that “the sun fights for him” (p. 661). According to some Arthurian scholars, Gawaine’s strength is a remnant of his original identity as a sun-god or human incarnation of the sun itself. This identification of Arthurian characters with gods is disputed among scholars today, but the hypothesis was widespread during the first half of the twentieth century.¹²² White’s incorporation of it as an old wives’ tale suggests how what may have been a religious or mythological belief survives in folklore. Guinevere also refers to his superhuman strength as “fairy strength” (p. 661).

In the comparatively late medieval period when *The Once and Future King* is set, Christianity has long since taken hold. Still, old deities and precautions against evil are not forgotten. For protection, Mother Morlan has “two horse-shoes nailed on the door – five statues bought from the pilgrims, with the used-up rosaries wound round them” (p. 250), and so on. The statues are presumably Christian saints. Horse-shoes, on the other hand, are considered lucky in folklore. This illustrates how people would often turn to both Christianity and folklore in order to ward off evil. Many dared not rely on the new religion alone, and stuck to old methods as well.

Pagan deities and spirits were often believed to inhabit natural locations such as hollow hills, springs, and trees. In an episode White takes from Malory, Lancelot is captured by four witches while sleeping underneath an apple tree (pp. 369-70). White says that the tree “was thought to be a magic one, which was the reason why such a heavy traffic went on around it” (p. 378). People would seek out such trees and make offerings to appease local spirits. Significantly, this practice continued long after the coming of Christianity. Not only particular specimens were the objects of worship.

¹²¹ John Darrah, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), p. 147.

¹²² Roger S. Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927).

Certain species of trees have magical properties, according to folklore (Briggs, *The Fairies*, pp. 98-100). Apple is one of them. It is a symbol “of the delights of the otherworld, and of fertility, replenishment and healing.”¹²³ This is in accordance with the notion that Avalon, the otherworldly valley or island to which Arthur is taken to be healed, means the Isle of Apples.

The Ill-Made Knight concerns itself with Lancelot’s relationship with Guinevere, and with Elaine’s unrequited love for him and her eventual suicide. As I mentioned in the chapter on Tennyson, the reaction of those who find Elaine in the barge in “Lancelot and Elaine” is fear and, to some degree, wonder at her beauty, which is compared to that of the Fairy Queen (Tennyson, p. 241, l. 1247). Tennyson suggests that since Elaine is dead, she is perceived as having passed from our world into an unknown state of existence, and is therefore compared to the fairies, who are also, according to folklore, at once part of this world and apart from it, due to their ethereal and immortal nature. In *The Ill-Made Knight*, “[d]eath had made [Elaine] older and different” (White, p. 535). Although no explicit fairy comparisons or references are made, White significantly states that she has “gone elsewhere – or vanished” (p. 535). Apparently her true self is perceived as having gone away, a term for being stolen by fairies. This may not be White’s intention; but it deserves consideration in light of Tennyson’s description. The notion that death renders a person unrecognisable to the point of not being perceived as human is present in both White and Tennyson.

In Chapter 2 I mentioned the medieval archetype of the Wild Man of the Woods. This character is found in *The Once and Future King* as well. In *The Sword in the Stone* there is Wat, who “had once lived in Sir Ector’s village” (p. 13). Wat is a

¹²³ Niall Mac Coitir, *Irish Trees: Myth, Legends and Folklore* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2003), p. 84.

hermit who is rumoured to have bit off a boy's nose once, and with whom parents scare their children. He does, however, turn out to be a peaceful man. White also includes the episode where Lancelot temporarily goes mad. He lives in the woods, naked like an animal and is indeed referred to as "the Wild Man" (p. 433). Such wild men were perceived as something between human and animal, "representing the animal side of human nature" (Lindahl *et al*, p. 433). Woodland was viewed with suspicion in the Victorian Period. In White's time, this had changed. Although the Wild Forest is home to many strange creatures, Arthur's adventures there are characterised by adventure and excitement rather than fear. White has often been characterised as misanthropic.¹²⁴ He depicts most animals more flattering than human beings, and "Merlin's prime virtue throughout the book is his oneness with nature" (Crane, p. 81).

By the time White gets to *The Book of Merlyn* the only supernatural beings which appear to be left are talking animals, familiar creatures with unfamiliar powers. These are animals to which Merlin introduced Arthur when he was a child, suggesting a connection to a more innocent and happier Arthur. According to folklore, Merlin teaches the girl Nimue magic and she uses it to imprison him underground or in a hollow tree. Local folklore in many places in Brittany and Britain claim that particular hills, trees or caves are Merlin's resting place. Rather than being locked up underground all alone, White's Merlin has stayed in the "ancient tumulus" (p. 714) of a badger, accompanied by numerous animals, and on the night before Arthur's final battle, Merlin takes him there. According to folklore, fairies often dwell in such tumuli. Arthur visited it as a boy, when Merlin used his magic to change him into animals. By the time Arthur turns seventeen, "[a]ll the

¹²⁴ John K. Crane, *T. H. White* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, a division of G. K. Hall & Co., 1974), p. 79.

magic for that sort of thing is used up” (p. 194), suggesting the connection between childhood/innocence and magic. When he is to meet the animals again in *The Book of Merlyn*, Merlin states that he “ought to be a boy” (p. 710). He proposes to give him the Elixir of Life, which is, according to folklore, made from the philosopher’s stone and makes people young or even grants immortality.

On their way there, Merlin and Arthur magically travel across parts of England. At “the thought-provoking monument of Stonehenge...Merlin, in passing, cried a salutation to the old gods whom Arthur could not see: to Crom, Bel, and others” (p. 714). Stonehenge, raised around 1500 BC, has indeed been thought-provoking for scholars and people in general for millennia. It is the focal point of an enormous amount of myth, folklore, and downright speculation. White suggests a connection to ancient worship of pagan gods. Stonehenge is relevant to Arthurian legend. Not only is it, according to folklore, the burial site of Arthur’s father, Uther Pendragon; Geoffrey of Monmouth even claims that Merlin brought it to Salisbury Plain from Ireland.

Then there is White’s treatment of the passing of Arthur. White’s Merlin lives backwards and is aware that he and Arthur will return:

‘It will not happen for hundreds of years, but both of us are to come back. Do you know what is going to be written on your tombstone? *Hic jacet Arthurus Rex quondam Rexque futurus*. Do you remember your Latin? It means, the once and future king.’

‘I am to come back as well as you?’

‘Some say from the vale of Avilion’ (p. 307).

This is the only explicit reference to Avalon in the main storyline of *The Once and Future King*. Merlin’s “[s]ome say” echoes *Le Morte d’Arthur*, where it is stated that “some men say in some parts of England that King Arthur is not dead”.¹²⁵ Merlin’s statement suggests that although he knows the wording of the inscription on Arthur’s

¹²⁵ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, volume ii, editor Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 519.

alleged tombstone, the actual whereabouts of Arthur's resting place remain hidden even from him. That "[s]ome say" Arthur will return from Avalon implies that others say otherwise, an allusion to local folklore. Some say that he sleeps in a cave, others that he is dead. But Arthur's grave remains a "mystery", "hard to find in the world", "the world's wonder" or however one may choose to translate and interpret "Stanzas of the Graves".¹²⁶

In *The Candle in the Wind*, on the night before his last battle, Arthur thinks that

[t]here would be a day – there must be a day – when he would come back to Gramarye with a new Round Table that had no corners, just as the world had none – a table without boundaries between the nations who would sit to feast there (pp. 696-97).

Arthur's main goals are to avoid war and encourage equality and friendship across borders. These are values he acquired from Merlin and the animals. Arthur is hoping for a second chance not for egotistical reasons, but in order to create a more peaceful world. Crane states that in this scene, "Arthur, now the once and future king, changes from a character with an ideal into the very symbol of that ideal" (Crane, p. 121). In Malory it is said that when he returns "he shall win the Holy Cross" (Malory, volume ii, p. 519). In White, the religious element is toned down. The purpose of Arthur's return is a more general union of the nations of the world.

As implied by Arthur's thoughts for the future, White's tale is set in Gramarye. This is recognisably Britain, but still a country of legend. As with Tennyson, who set *Idylls of the King* in Lyonesse, White's setting allows for greater artistic freedom regarding the use of legendary and folkloric elements. In "Puck's Song" from Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, the title character sings that

She is not any common earth
Water or wood or air,
But Merlyn's Isle of Gramarye

¹²⁶ "Stanzas of the Graves", quoted in Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien created a new mythology*, second edition (Grafton, Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), p. 20.

Where you and I will fare.¹²⁷

White uses this as an epigraph in *The Sword in the Stone*. Gramarye is Britain, but a Britain where creatures of folklore are not confined to legend. The word gramarye is related to grammar and means “occult learning, magic, necromancy”.¹²⁸

When he speaks with Merlin before his last battle Arthur is aware that his death is imminent. Gawain has appeared to him with a warning in a dream, in White’s version as in Tennyson (White p. 701, Tennyson pp. 288-89). Merlin comforts him by referring to those who will preserve the legend in writing. He mentions the major writers: Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Gerald of Wales, Layamon, Thomas Malory and even White himself (p. 702). He warns Arthur that they have shaped the legend as it has come down to us, and that most of what is written is far from the truth: “what a lot of lies they all managed to tell!” (p. 702). Merlin refers to White as the one “who thought that we represented the ideas of chivalry. He said that our importance lay in our decency, in our resistance against the bloody mind of man. What an anachronist he was, dear fellow!” (p. 702). This is presumably White’s answer to the many critics who have found his intentional anachronisms annoying. It also serves the function of reminding the reader that all accounts of Arthurian legend are coloured by the time period in which they were written down. White is hardly the only Arthurian writer guilty of anachronism; on the other hand, he may be the only one to use it deliberately.

White ends *The Book of Merlyn* with a short, but detailed overview of Arthurian legend. He mentions the exhumation of Arthur’s alleged grave at Glastonbury Abbey ordered by Henry II, who did it “as a counter-blast to Welsh nationalism – for the Cymry were claiming even then that the great king never

¹²⁷ Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 42.

¹²⁸ T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien created a new mythology*, second edition (London: Grafton, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), p. 48.

perished” (p. 809). Different writers and historians claim different dates for the exhumation of Arthur’s body. White refers to this, and gives a nod to folklore by mentioning that whatever the date, “tradition has it that the bones when exhumed were of gigantic stature” (p. 809). This echoes Gerald of Wales, one of the chroniclers mentioned by Merlin.¹²⁹ In folklore, Arthur and his men are not only fighting against giants, but are of gigantic stature themselves, or at least far bigger than ordinary human beings. In the folk-tale “Guinevere’s Comb” Arthur throws a stone, “a large block of many tons weight”¹³⁰ at Guinevere. This incident is an example of a place named after Arthurian characters. Two stone formations in the location where this is supposed to have happened are known as “the King’s Crag and the Queen’s Crag” (Briggs, p. 281). They are located near Sewingshields, where Arthur is also supposed to be sleeping in the vaults of a castle. In a similar incident, Arthur “felt a pebble in his shoe and tossed it away” (Ashe, *Mythology*, p. 254). This “pebble” is known as Arthur’s Stone. It remains on the Gower Peninsula and weighs over 25 tons (Ashe, p. 254). In folklore, he has grown to be a larger than life king.¹³¹

White gives only an elusive account of the passing of Arthur. He sums up the most important literary accounts of it, stating that some regard “the entire account as absurd” (White, p. 810), others “scout the question entirely, or remain in learned confusion” (p. 810). “Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson and a number of other reliable witnesses agree that he is still on earth” (p. 810-11). The term “reliable witnesses” vaguely suggests the old idea that artists and poets are more in touch with the Otherworld or spiritual world than most people.

¹²⁹ Gerald of Wales, “Liber de Principis Instructione” (circa 1193), at <http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/debarri.html>

¹³⁰ Katharine Mary Briggs, *British Folk-Tales and Legends: A Sampler* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 281.

¹³¹ Gwyn Jones, *Kings Beasts and Heroes* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 67.

Then White turns to “[t]he legends of the common people” (p. 811), the folklore traditions, which he describes as “rich, strange and beautiful” (p. 811). Mentioning all of them would be out of the question: They are far too numerous. But he mentions the tradition according to which Arthur sleeps inside, and is sometimes seen in the vicinity of, Mount Etna. This refers to the first mention of Arthur as a cave sleeper.¹³² Cervantes claims in *Don Quixote* that Arthur’s spirit resides in a raven (White, p. 810), a tradition which is also found in Britain: In one tradition he “had been enchanted in England into the form of a crow”,¹³³ and in Cornwall, Arthur is identified with the chough¹³⁴ and the nath (puffin) (Evans-Wentz, p. 184, 183n). White mentions the belief about huntsmen riding at night, calling themselves Arthur’s men (p. 811). This was recorded by Gervase of Tilbury in 1212. According to folklore, Arthur and his men ride in several places, for instance on Goss Moor in Cornwall (Deane and Shaw, p. 26) and by Cadbury Castle near Glastonbury Tor in Somerset (Briggs, *The Fairies*, p. 91). A similar belief exists in Scotland (Chambers, p. 228), and in Ireland, where Arthur “rides around a rath, with sword upraised” (White, p. 810). This reflects Arthur’s connection with Fairyland and his possible fairy origin: Fairies are supposed to dwell in raths. The word is Irish for Neolithic graves which were believed to be of fairy origin (Purkiss, p. 204). Lysaght claims that the reason why so many such raths are preserved in Ireland is the belief that the fairies would harm those who touched them.¹³⁵

White refers to some other landmarks and places connected with Arthur and to an incident which took place at Bodmin Moor in 1113 (Deane and Shaw, p. 26). A

¹³² E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd., 1927), p. 221.

¹³³ Roger Sherman Loomis, “The Legend of Arthur’s Survival” in Roger Sherman Loomis, editor, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 64.

¹³⁴ Tony Deane and Tony Shaw, *The Folklore of Cornwall* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1975), p. 22.

¹³⁵ Lysaght, Patricia, “Fairylore from the Midlands of Ireland” I Peter Narváez, editor, *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), p. 45.

visiting party of monks was assaulted by the town's inhabitants because they claimed that Arthur had never existed. Like the exhumation of Arthur's grave, this suggests the reverence with which Arthur was regarded by the British. Bodmin Moor is in Cornwall, where many local sites have an alleged Arthurian connection. Although Cornwall is particularly abundant in Arthurian place names, Arthur's name is connected to places elsewhere in Britain as well. Many of them certainly have nothing to do with him, but they may nevertheless be of interest in a historical context. Remains of earlier civilisations are often considered the dwellings of characters and creatures of folklore. Many alleged fairy hills are ancient barrows and fortified dwellings. Rowling states that "historians and archaeologists know that where popular imaginations have named places after the devil, or other supernatural beings, or after some cult hero like King Arthur, Puck or Robin Hood, remains of considerable interest may be looked for".¹³⁶

The only attempt White makes at a conclusion entirely his own is to suggest that Arthur does indeed dwell beneath a hill, a tumulus, in Bodmin, Cornwall (White, p. 812), the site of the 1113 incident – in the badger's sett with "his learned friends" (White, p. 812), Merlin and the animals. White is

inclined to believe that my beloved Arthur of the future is sitting at this very moment in the Combination Room of the College of Life, and that they are thinking away in there for all they are worth, about the best means to help our curious species: and I for one hope that some day, when not only England, but the World has need of them, and it is ready to listen to reason, if it ever is, they will issue from their rath in joy and power: and then, perhaps, they will give us happiness in the world once more and chivalry, and the old medieval blessing of certain simple people – who tried, at any rate, in their own small way, to still the ancient brutal dream of Attila the Hun (p. 812).

As a foundation for his "animal hypothesis" White cites "Quixote's hint about the animals" (p. 812), the belief that Arthur is a raven, "and Milton's subterranean

¹³⁶ Marjorie Rowling, *The Folklore of the Lake District* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976), p. 15.

dream” (p. 812). Milton considered writing an epic on Arthurian legend, but instead decided upon the fall of the angels and of man, what eventually became *Paradise Lost*. The “subterranean dream” is his comment “Arthurumque, etiam sub terries bella moventem” (‘and Arthur too, stirring up wars beneath the earth’).¹³⁷ White connects the quote with pieces of folklore and, admittedly, his own book: “the hedgehog’s last farewell” (p. 812). The hedgehog says “Orryvoyer” (p. 864), which is presumably “au revoir”, implying that they will meet again.

Some of the folklore Tennyson uses in *Idylls of the King*, for instance the connection between fairies and innocence, is more Victorian than medieval. As for White, he introduces folklore from many periods, usually English or British folklore, sometimes from other mythologies. In both White and Tennyson the presence of fairies and other creatures of folklore – more generally, the presence of magic – are connected with Arthur’s childhood and the early years of the reign, the time before the adultery of the queen and the decline of the Round Table, the allegedly innocent past. White acknowledges the threatening nature of fairies, but also states that only innocent people can approach them, which is why only children, in this case Kay and Arthur, are able to enter their dwellings. This is not always the case in folktales, but even in the latter, fairies do appear to have a penchant for stealing children. “[A]n inability to hear or see fairies is the mark of an adult” (Purkiss, p. 239).

White conjures up an Arthur who will return to save the world, not just the British. In White’s account he becomes an international role model for pacifism and mutual understanding. Like Tennyson White commends chivalry, but chivalry from a decidedly modern point of view, with the emphasis on fairness, empathy, peace and tolerance, rather than jousting and honourable conduct in warfare. The Arthur of

¹³⁷ John Milton, quoted in White, p. 811.

folklore sleeps inside a hollow hill alongside a band of armed men, who will rise to fight if they are summoned in the right way (Chambers, pp. 223-24). White's Arthur prepares for the future in a badger's sett, where he discusses anti-war philosophy with a group of animals.

The Arthur of medieval romances and popular, folkloric tradition functions as a national saviour figure and a symbol of hope of independence for the Welsh in particular and the Celts in general, and later as a symbol of the prevalence of the Christian faith. In White's twentieth-century work he symbolizes the hope of a peaceful future where boundaries between nations lose their importance and conflicts will be solved without violent conflict. From a general perspective, this shows how times and needs change. From a specifically Arthurian point of view, it illustrates the versatility of the legend. Writers can write wildly different stories and yet be true to at least one tradition so that their version will have its place in the context of Arthurian legend, as White's book certainly does. This is presumably part of the reason why it remains popular with authors, and why it does not become boring or irrelevant despite its considerable age.

When White provides his short "summary" of Arthurian literature and folklore at the end of *The Once and Future King*, most of the incidents he refers to have been a part of local lore in some part of Britain for centuries, in some cases maybe more than a millennium. White's overview emphasises the popularity of the legend. He includes folklore and local traditions as well as the literary tradition – the former are equally important. Arthur is cherished not only by great writers and poets and an upper class audience. The legend has been kept alive among common people as well, through tales and local folklore. Not only are the books of Malory and Tennyson still being read; the folklore is also remembered and passed down to new generations.

While there are presumably few who still believe that Arthur will return, the legend still symbolises hope. Authors such as White help maintain the folklore tradition, an essential part of Britain's cultural heritage, by incorporating it into easily accessible works of fiction.

The ending of *The Once and Future King* might have been a somewhat anticlimactic way of avoiding to describe how it all ends. At the same time, it is a rather touching tribute to Arthur in that it illustrates just how many traditions and beliefs exist about him, suggesting an enormous popularity. White's irony is sometimes amusing, but at other times tiresome to the point where it might make the reader question why he chose Arthurian legend as his subject. Crane accuses White of obscuring "the central purpose with an enormous amount of comedy and satire directed at the Arthurian legend" in *The Sword in the Stone* (Crane, p. 86). The familiarity with the Arthurian tradition suggested by the conclusion of *The Book of Merlyn*, however, implies a profound respect and love for it.

Also, it is somewhat suitable that the passing of Arthur, surrounded by so much mystery and folklore, is treated only vaguely. Nothing certain can be said of it, even by a writer who has recounted Arthur's life story. White follows a long tradition of writers who are rather obscure about the passing of Arthur. White's acquaintance with different folkloric traditions suggest that he includes folklore deliberately because it is an important part of the Arthurian tradition; it is no mere whim. Most of the folklore he includes in the basic storyline is general folklore. Some elements, such as fairies, are traditionally, though by no means exclusively, connected with Arthur. Other elements White uses are not, for instance unicorns and Robin Hood. If the reader can get past the rather obvious metaphor provided by the former and the anachronism of the latter, this does, admittedly, function to root Arthur even more

deeply within folklore in a work which has had a seminal influence. The folklore he refers to at the end of *The Book of Merlyn* is specifically Arthurian. Most of it features an Arthur who is still alive in some form, and who is cherished by his countrymen. This suggests how White's subject matter, Arthur's life on earth, is only the beginning of the tales about him. White's sometimes whimsical and undignified account of Arthur ends on a rather humble note.

Chapter 4

“As tall as an oak tree and as strong as Fionn”¹³⁸: Folklore in Mary Stewart’s *The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills* and *The Last Enchantment*

When T. H. White wrote *The Once and Future King*, fantasy literature was not yet a major genre. This changed during the second half of the twentieth century. The genre continues to grow significantly in popularity and extent. There are changing trends in fantasy as in literature in general. During the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, there was a shift to a more realistic, less idealised storytelling. This also included Arthurian retellings. The British author Mary Stewart’s Arthurian trilogy is an example of this. Most previous retellings of Arthurian legend are set in the late medieval period. The emphasis now shifted to on recounting the legend as realistically as possible given the scant amount of data available on the subject of fifth- and sixth-century Britain in general and the historical Arthur in particular. Research was being done on the subject of the allegedly historical commander-in-chief who may have inspired the body of legends in the first place. Scholars such as Leslie Alcock and Geoffrey Ashe have done extensive research into the possible historical background of Arthurian legend.

Stewart’s Arthurian novels are *The Crystal Cave* (1970)¹³⁹, *The Hollow Hills* (1973)¹⁴⁰, *The Last Enchantment* (1979)¹⁴¹ and *The Wicked Day* (1983). The first three focus on Merlin. The latter is about Mordred. I have chosen to limit myself to

¹³⁸ Mary Stewart, *The Last Enchantment* (New York: Eos, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1979), p. 31.

¹³⁹ *The Crystal Cave* (New York: Eos, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1970). I will refer to *The Crystal Cave* as CC in my page references.

¹⁴⁰ Mary Stewart, *The Hollow Hills* (New York: Eos, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1973). *The Hollow Hills* as HH in my page references

¹⁴¹ Mary Stewart, *The Last Enchantment* (New York: Eos, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1979). I will refer to *The Last Enchantment* as LE in my page references.

writing about the Merlin novels. Stewart's story is set in post-Roman Britain. Her books are realistic in nature and focus a lot on the political conflicts and developments that are often in the background in Arthurian literature. Although the setting is post-Roman Britain, the general attitudes and morality expressed by characters such as Merlin and Arthur are in accordance with modern ones. Taylor and Brewer comment that the "characters are depicted in terms of modern psychology and moral attitudes".¹⁴² Stewart's books have proved popular with readers, and part of the reason might be that despite the distant time setting, her characters are easy to identify with.

Although Stewart's novels are realistic, Merlin's magical abilities are central to her retelling. He is the main character and the first person narrator. Stewart's Merlin is Arthur's councillor and cousin, the illegitimate son of Uther's brother Ambrosius. Merlin is far from the traditional magician of White's *The Once and Future King*. His magical ability is limited to his second sight, which is allegedly caused by a connection with a god who occasionally – though never on command – speaks through Merlin and grants him visions of what is hidden and of the future. Such second sight would be called ESP (extrasensory perception) in modern psychology. This second sight comes at a price. Merlin is somewhat socially inept, tuned to the god rather than to his fellow human beings. He is inexperienced with women, having chosen a life in celibacy, which was traditionally believed to enhance spiritual abilities. Stewart has invented most of the story of Merlin's life.¹⁴³ It is, however, based on medieval sources, particularly Geoffrey's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which Stewart calls "[h]istorically speaking...appalling, but as a story it is

¹⁴² Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Literature since 1900* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 303.

¹⁴³ Mary Stewart, "Author's note" in *The Crystal Cave* (New York: Eos, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1970), pp. 491-92.

tremendous stuff” (CC, p. 492). Critics disagree about Malory’s influence on her work. Goodman states that “[t]he Arthurian writings of Alfred Lord Tennyson, T. H. White, John Steinbeck Mary Stewart, and Marion Zimmer Bradley all testify in their own ways to [*Le Morte d’Arthur*’s] power.”¹⁴⁴ Moorman claims that she has “abandoned him almost entirely”.¹⁴⁵

Stewart’s Merlin is a likable and human character, peace-loving and amiable. Kristina Hildebrand points out that part of Stewart’s achievement “lies in her convincing portrayal of the mystic who is also human”.¹⁴⁶ Stewart’s Merlin is, however, feared by many. His foresight and knowledge are interpreted as magic. This brings me to the focus of this chapter. Like White and Tennyson Mary Stewart does use folklore and legend in her retelling of Arthurian legend, but lot of the time she does so in a different way than them. White and Tennyson incorporate Arthurian and general folklore into their texts without really examining its origins. Folklore is traditionally a part of Arthurian legend, and they use it as such. Stewart focuses on the realistic parts of the legend and on the political situation in post-Roman Britain and suggests how legends and folklore surrounding Arthurian characters may have arisen in the first place. She gives hypothetic suggestions of the historical foundations for the mythic and folkloric material. This is what I will concentrate on in this chapter. I will also look at her depiction of the old religion and how it is alive despite the growing power of Christianity. I will first provide a short summary of the trilogy.

¹⁴⁴ Jennifer R. Goodman, *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, a division of G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), p. 46.

¹⁴⁵ Charles Moorman, “Yet Some Men Say ...that Kynge Arthure Ys Nat Ded” in Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge, editors, *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), p. 193.

¹⁴⁶ Kristina Hildebrand, *The Female Reader at the Round Table: Religion and Women in Three Contemporary Arthurian Texts* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2001), p. 92.

The Crystal Cave tells the story of Merlin's childhood. He grows up at the court of his maternal grandfather, a Welsh petty king, and becomes an apprentice of the hermit Galapas, who lives in a cave in the vicinity. As Ambrosius's son Merlin is, theoretically, a contestant for the British throne. After his uncle makes an attempt on his life, Merlin runs away to Brittany. He discovers his parentage and stays there with his father for five years. When he returns to Wales, Galapas is dead. Merlin buries him and moves into the cave, Bryn Myrddin. He meets Uther and helps him into the castle where Igraine is so the conception of Arthur can take place.

In *The Hollow Hills* Merlin leaves Bryn Myrddin. Arthur is being fostered by Sir Ector in the Wild Forest, and Merlin takes up his abode in a hermitage in the woods after its former inhabitant dies. When Arthur grows older, Merlin becomes his tutor. On the night after Arthur's first battle he meets his half sister Morgause for the first time. Mordred is conceived. *The Hollow Hills* ends with Arthur finding the sword and being recognised as the rightful heir to the throne upon Uther's death.

The Last Enchantment follows the early years of Arthur's reign. Merlin is his councillor, and Arthur marries Guinevere. The last part of the book recounts Merlin's relationship with Nimuë. According to legend, Nimuë tricks Merlin into revealing his magic secrets and imprisons him in a cave. Stewart's Merlin does teach Nimuë what he knows, but this is medicine and herblore rather than magic. She does, however, have visionary powers herself. A relationship develops between them. Morgause poisons Merlin. His bodily functions slow down to the point where he is believed to be dead. He is placed in Bryn Myrddin and the entrance is blocked with stones. Merlin eventually wakes up, is rescued and returns to Arthur's court to spend the rest of his days leading a quiet life.

His illegitimate parentage is one reason why Merlin is looked upon with suspicion from childhood. People fear him because he is perceived as not quite human. Geoffrey states that he is the child of an incubus demon and a mortal woman.¹⁴⁷ In Stewart's account, this tale is a cover-up his mother uses so as not to have to reveal the identity of his father. This is one example of Stewart making a tentative suggestion about the possible origin of a legend. When she is interrogated Merlin's mother claims that her lover was "a familiar spirit" (CC, p. 283).

Significantly, everyone present – many prominent men, King Vortigern among them – believes her. Echoing Geoffrey's account, a high priest states that the conception of a child by a mortal woman and a spirit is possible, that "certain spirits, haunting the air at night between the moon and the earth, cohabit at their will with mortal women, in the shape of men" (CC, p. 284). A female spirit of this kind is called a succubus, a male one an incubus. Such incubi may have been an accepted explanation for extramarital pregnancies. The high priest identifies the spirit as "the Devil" (CC, p. 284). This suggests the Church's view of folkloric creatures. Briggs points out that "the weight of Church authority"¹⁴⁸ was against them. They were called ghosts or devils, "and the words hobgoblin, bug or boggart gradually assumed a more dangerous sound" (Briggs, *The Anatomy*, p. 15). The Church wished to restrain people from believing in other powers than God.

When he learns that Merlin is allegedly only half human, Vortigern wishes to sacrifice him. His attempts to build a stronghold keep failing; the foundations crumble every time his engineers try. His councillors have advised him to sacrifice a fatherless boy. Geoffrey's Merlin claims that there are dragons beneath the fortress.

¹⁴⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 167-68.

¹⁴⁸ Katharine Mary Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs in Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 15.

Stewart's Merlin, however, has a vision of water that seeps in and floods and destroys the foundations. When he gives voice to what he has seen, however, he states that the subterranean pool contains two dragons which must be removed. It appears that making the builders believe that there are dragons is easier than explaining the true reason why the stronghold keeps falling, and the effect is the same. In the attempt to find the dragons, the pool is drained, and the building can continue uninterrupted by any more flooding. Geoffrey's Merlin also says that a pool is the reason why the tower keeps falling before he launches into the explanation about the dragons. Whereas Geoffrey depicts the dragons and the pool as equally real, the pool is the real reason in Stewart's account. The dragons are presumably only a metaphor. Stewart's Merlin also uses his second sight to solve a problem. Even so, the way he does it is not as spectacular as in Geoffrey; no actual mythic beasts are involved.

Geoffrey also credits Merlin with moving Stonehenge from Ireland by magic. This is often dismissed as Geoffrey's invention. Castleden does, however, suggest that "the discovery in the twentieth century that the bluestones at Stonehenge had in fact been transported from South-West Wales" implies that it might be based on actual folklore.¹⁴⁹ It "has been described as a remnant of Bronze Age oral literature".¹⁵⁰ In Stewart, Stonehenge is already at Salisbury plain, as it has indeed been for several millennia. Merlin only moves some stones, among them the so-called Altar Stone, from Ireland. His engineering skills and the help of a number of workers enable him to bring them to Britain and raise them. They sing while they work, giving rise to a popular belief that Merlin raised Stonehenge by music and magic. This is another example of how Stewart suggests a mundane background for a

¹⁴⁹ Rodney Castleden, *King Arthur: The Truth Behind the Legend*, second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 35.

¹⁵⁰ ¹⁵⁰ John Darrah, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), p. 209.

legend. The building echoes Tennyson's "Gareth and Lynette", where folklore has it that Camelot was built to music.¹⁵¹ Both writers' accounts echo the building of Troy.

Stonehenge is called the Giants' Ring in Geoffrey and the Giants' Dance in Stewart's trilogy. These names suggest one possible belief about its origin. In some legends giants have the same inability to endure sunlight as the trolls of Scandinavian folklore; it petrifies them. Folklore connects standing stones to giants not only in that they are, in some traditions, supposed to have had a hand in raising them; in some traditions such stones are even regarded as petrified giants. In Stewart's account the legend that Uther and Ambrosius are buried at Stonehenge is true. This is presumably a sufficiently realistic belief for her to include it.

Merlin's engineering skills surpass those of most of his contemporaries. The hermit Galapas teaches Merlin about medicine and anatomy as well. He also facilitates the development of Merlin's prophetic abilities. Within his cave there is a smaller one, lined with crystals. Inside it, helped along by light flickering off the crystals, Merlin has his first real vision. (CC, p. 69-70) The cave and the well outside it are sacred to Myrddin, whom Stewart makes a Celtic sky god. In the first extant accounts of Merlin, he is also called Myrddin; it is the Welsh version of his name. Stewart has his mother say that she "named him for the sky-god, the wanderer" (CC, p. 283). When Merlin returns to Bryn Myrddin after many years' absence in *The Last Enchantment*, people call it Merlin's Hill. Merlin believes "the simpler folk even thought that I was Myrddin himself, the guardian of the spring" (LE, p. 69). The "magic" for which he is renowned and held in awe is only partly his second sight. Mostly, it is knowledge not many share; in Merlin's case medicine and engineering.

¹⁵¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 43.

Goodman states that “his true stock in trade is science, not magic”.¹⁵² His knowledge has probably made an extra impression on “the simpler folk”, leading them to not only revere Merlin in his own right, but to elevate him to quasi-divine status thanks to his skill as a healer.

This illustrates that at the time when Stewart’s novels are set, the old, polytheistic religion has not quite given way to Christianity. Many Celts believe in gods and spirits of nature, and the gods of the Roman pantheon have been adopted by some. This often happens when a country is invaded. Merlin states that “[t]he Church frowned upon the lot, but could not do much about it” (*CC*, p. 58). Loomis states that “[t]hough Britain, under Roman domination, had been partly Christianized in the second century, the welsh in the tenth century still remembered the heathen divinities as beings, endowed with supernatural powers, who had lived long ago The clergy might condemn them as devils, but the laity were more tolerant”.¹⁵³ Even Christians leave offerings for the sky god by the well outside the cave. Some Christian men approach Merlin’s cave in *The Hollow Hills*. They initially refuse to drink for Myrddin due to their religion (*HH*, p. 216). But when Merlin states that “he watches still” (*HH*, p. 216), they all drink and spill water as a sacrifice to the god. Merlin reminds them that “[i]t does not do to forget that the old gods still watch from the air and wait in the hollow hills” (*HH*, p. 216). Although the trilogy spans several decades, during which Christianity presumably gains a firmer hold upon the general population, the practice shows no signs of subsisting. Offerings are still being made when Merlin is buried in Bryn Myrddin (*LE*, pp. 406-407). The official religion is Christianity; but in practice, it is difficult to make people abstain from practices

¹⁵² Jennifer Goodman, *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1998), p. 106.

¹⁵³ Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), p. 20.

which have been observed time out of mind and survived almost half a millennium of occupation.

Stewart's depiction of religious plurality in fifth-century Britain may be more conflict-free than it actually was. There is a slight clash between Vortigern's priest wishing to kill Merlin because he is supposedly the son of a spirit and the apparently peaceful religious pluralism depicted in other situations. On the other hand, "bishops were using their authority to sanctify wells" (Darrah, p. 90) later in the Middle Ages. This seems to have come about "because the people retained their ancient attachment to the wells on account of their supposed magical powers, often in spite of rededication to a Christian saint" (Darrah, pp. 90-91). This practice illustrates that Christianity replaces pagan religion. It does, however, also suggest the strength of these old beliefs. It was apparently a better solution to sanctify places where people were accustomed to worship, rather than forbid them to worship there at all.

Significantly, the old, pagan gods are worshipped not only in shrines, but at natural locations such as springs and hills. This is true to actual pagan religious practices (Darrah, p. 4). They are a kind of *genii loci*, spirits of particular places, who guard those places and those who live nearby as long as they are paid respect in the form of offerings. They are closely connected to the land itself and to the powers of nature, these "small spirits that haunt hill and stream and forest, together with the greater gods of air, whose power breathes through clouds and frost and speaking wind" (*LE*, p. 6). Merlin believes it is "possible that these beings made of the air and earth and water of our sweet land, were harder to dislodge than the visiting gods of Rome" (*LE*, p. 45). The local gods "move with the winds and speak with the sea and sleep in the gentle herbs" (*LE*, p. 133). Britain has been invaded several times, by the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans. The new peoples have brought

their religion and deities with them to Britain. They take hold for a while, and to some degree replace the British ones. As Merlin observes, however, they are more easily forgotten upon the departure or replacement of an invading people, in this case the withdrawal of the Romans, than the original gods of the land, who are more deeply embedded in people's minds and, according to folklore, tied to the land itself. Darrah suggests that Celtic gods have been incorporated into Arthurian romance as royal human beings, a way of preserving oral tradition and old religious practices without invoking the anger of the clergy (Darrah, p. 4). This is, however, merely one theory among many on the origin of Arthurian characters.

The Hollow Hills is named for what is traditionally regarded as the dwelling-places of spirits and fairies. The fairy-faith is certainly alive in Stewart's trilogy. As in Tennyson, however, the people who inhabit caves and woods are actually "old celts" (Tennyson, p. 366) who were "dispossessed by the Romans and had fled into the waste places of the hills" (*LE*, p. 265). They are elusive and small in stature, keep to themselves and speak a Brythonic dialect which is already archaic when the trilogy takes place. Their stature and distinct way of life set them so much apart that they are perceived as a non-human race and looked upon with suspicion, as is often the case with the unknown. They are enduring, four hundred years after their dispossession they are "still there, in their remote mountain fastnesses, and the Romans themselves had gone" (*LE*, p. 265). Like the Celtic elementals, this Celtic or pre-Celtic people remains after the Romans and their gods have left. White's fairies are an ancient race, but apparently of otherworldly origin, since they were present before the first human beings. Tennyson mentions spirits, fairies and other creatures of folklore without addressing their origin, and although he does suggest that some of them are actually human, others – spirits and merpeople – are undoubtedly not.

Stewart's alleged fairies, however, are indisputably real people, although most people are unaware of this. Merlin calls them Old Ones. Stewart not only alludes to the theory that fairies are remnants of old peoples – in this case, not only their spirits, but the people themselves – she uses it directly, once again exploring the background of a legend or folkloric belief.

When he arrives in the Wild Forest, Merlin is directed to another shrine, “a holy place for some god to dwell in” (*HH*, p. 273). There is a well there, fed by a natural spring, like at Bryn Myrddin. The resident hermit is ill. Merlin nurses him and promises to make sure that the shrine is taken care of after his death. He ends up staying there. The shrine is at one point referred to as the Green Chapel. This is the name of the Green Knight's residence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹⁵⁴ It is later called the Perilous Chapel by Arthur (*LE*, p. 7, *HH*, p. 445); “it [is] called a chapel now” (*LE*, p. 6), Merlin says. This signifies the growing power of the Church. Calling the shrine Merlin used to keep a chapel emphasises that Merlin is no stranger to Christianity. Significantly, “it had been a holy place long before men had laid stone on stone and raised the altar” (*LE*, p. 6). Churches are often built in places which have been sacred from before the introduction of Christianity, presumably to symbolise how Christianity replaces the old religion, echoing the sanctification of wells. Whatever name it goes by, this shrine is “still haunted with all its ancient holiness; the older gods received their sacrifices” (*LE*, pp. 6-7).

In *The Last Enchantment* Merlin visits a shrine near the Severn (*LE*, p. 42), dedicated to Nodens, the Romano-British King of the Otherworld.¹⁵⁵ This is an actual pagan temple dedicated to this god (Darrah, p. 178). According to Stewart it

¹⁵⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, translator, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, editor Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 30.

¹⁵⁵ Brynley F. Roberts, “Gwynn ap Nudd” in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 190.

“had been a hill fortress at first, with maybe a stone or a spring dedicated to the god who cared for the spirits of dead men” (*LE*, p. 43). In Roman times it was mined, and “it may have been the Romans who first called the place the Hill of the Dwarfs, after the small dark men who worked there” (*LE*, p. 43). After the mine closed, the name persisted. Based upon the stature of the miners, it came to suggest a connection with non-human races in folklore, and apparently with the spiritual world, since the place is a shrine.

Merlin is aware that ancient mines, burial mounds and earthworks are remnants of previous civilizations. Most of his contemporaries are ignorant of this, leading to a connection between such abandoned places and the Otherworld in folklore. Purkiss states that today, “there are no civilizations about which we know nothing except the silence of what they built”.¹⁵⁶ At the time when Stewart’s novels are set, however, there were. The remnants of their buildings are often perceived as fairy dwellings or entrances to Fairyland. In the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Wanderer” old Roman villas are described as “eald enta geweorc” (the ancient work of giants), implying people’s belief about their origin.¹⁵⁷ In British folklore many such remnants of old buildings and structures are connected with specific legendary characters, often Arthurian ones. Rowling states that the “bestowal of Arthurian names on buildings whose true origin has been forgotten is found in districts where a British population survived the Norman domination.”¹⁵⁸ In *The Hollow Hills*, Merlin takes shelter in “a ruinous shell of a building in the deep in the forest” (*HH*, p, 236). This has come to be called

¹⁵⁶ Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy-Stories*, XXXX p. 320.

¹⁵⁷ John C. Pope, editor, *Eight Old English Poems*, third edition (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 30, l. 87.

¹⁵⁸ Marjorie Rowling, *The Folklore of the Lake District* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976), p. 42.

Arthur's Oven.¹⁵⁹ It is actually "an ancient tin-smelting furnace" (Castleden, p. 35). Its Arthurian connection was first documented in 1113 (Lindahl *et al*, p. 24).

Stories are indeed told about Nodens's shrine, about "the Old Ones who were seen lurking in the oak woods, or who came thronging out of the earth's depths on nights of storm and starlight to join the train of the dark king, as he rode from his hollow hill with his wild rout of ghosts and enchanted spirits" (*LE*, p. 43). The Old Ones do inhabit caves and hollow hills, and since they are clever at avoiding to be seen if they wish to remain hidden, folklore has it that they are a subterranean fairy race. According to tradition Nodens, to whom this shrine is dedicated, or his son Gwynn ap Nudd, lead the Wild Hunt.¹⁶⁰ The Wild Hunt is also referred to when Merlin hears wild geese alight from a lake which used to surround Glastonbury Tor. He imagines that it is "the pack of heaven's hounds, the Wild Hunt that courses the skies with Llud, King of the Otherworld, in time of war and storm...Straight from the silent Tor they came" (*LE*, p. 271). This echoes British folklore, where "the sound of geese passing unseen overhead at night"¹⁶¹ is indeed believed to be caused by the Wild Hunt, which in some traditions consists of dogs and in others the souls of the dead, always led by some famous legendary person. Glastonbury Tor is surrounded by much folklore, and Stewart refers to the belief that "[t]he Tor was a known gate to the Otherworld" (*LE*, p. 286). Llud is the Irish version of the Welsh Nudd. Both are etymologically related to Nodens, to whom the shrine is dedicated. This illustrates how the same deities come to be incorporated into different pantheons.

¹⁵⁹ Raymond Thompson, interview with Mary Stewart, on <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/intervws/stewart.htm>

¹⁶⁰ Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival" in Roger Sherman Loomis, editor, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 71.

¹⁶¹ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess; A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, editor Grevel Lindop (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 85.

While White and Tennyson set their Arthurian stories in an idealised and non-specific medieval period, Stewart goes back to the period when Arthurian legend and folklore originated, or at least to the events which may have inspired it. Real events pass quickly into legend in Stewart's novels, especially those which have an air of mystery about them in the first place. Arthur states that people avoid talking about his accession to the throne: "Already it is as if it had happened well in the past, in some song or story" (*LE*, p. 179). Merlin says that "[t]he magic was real, and too strong for many of those who witnessed it, but it has burned into the memories of all who saw it, and into the memory of the folk who make the songs and legends" (*LE*, p. 180). People do not discuss whatever supernatural events may have taken place directly, but incorporate events beyond the mundane into their songs and tales. As these are passed on events are exaggerated and mixed with existing folklore. Gradually, such events give rise to folklore themselves. A plethora of legends grow around Arthur while he is still in his youth. The keepers of Nodens's shrine have heard that "[Arthur] killed four hundred of the Saxon beasts with a magic word that sang and drank blood" (*LE*, p. 49). At the beginning of *The Last Enchantment* Arthur's mother Ygraine has heard rumours that Arthur is

as tall as an oak tree and as strong as Fionn, and slew nine hundred men with his own hand alone. He is Ambrosius come again, or Maximus himself, with a sword like the lightning, and the witchlight around him in battle like the pictures of the gods at the fall of Troy. And he is Merlin's shadow and spirit, and a great hound follows him everywhere, to whom he speaks as to a familiar" (*LE*, p. 31).

"Tall as an oak tree" suggests the stories where Arthur is a giant. In folklore, his power is sometimes expressed by crediting him with superhuman size. Briggs points out that "any great and heroic character tended to swell to giant's size in popular memory" (Briggs, *The Anatomy*, p. 153). The comparison with Fionn, a hero from Irish myth, suggests strength and also popularity; comparison with an admired

hero is a flattering compliment. It will not be long before Arthur himself is the basis for comparison in “Y Gododdin”, where a man is described as a brave fighter, “though he was no Arthur”.¹⁶² Nennius claims that Arthur killed nine hundred and sixty men unaided.¹⁶³ Arthur strength in battle is suggested in the comparison of his sword with lightning; even his relationship to Merlin has attained an air of mystery and magic in the popular mind. The great hound which follows him is his dog Cabal. Folklore compares it to a familiar, a witch’s helping animal.¹⁶⁴ The truth is distorted until it becomes the stuff of legend; and quite a lot is added for good measure. In Stewart’s retelling, much of the folklore and legend about Arthur and his companions arises during their lifetimes.

Merlin’s deeds – “[t]he story of the dragons at Dinas Emrys, the rasing of the king-stone at Kildare, the lifting of the sword of Macsen from the stone” (*LE*, pp. 217-18) also pass quickly into legend. Even if Merlin is a historical person, the things which are “remembered” about him include magic. Stewart gives an account of what the life of Merlin might actually have been like; a fictional, yet realistic account. His visions set him apart, but Stewart depicts many accomplishments for which he is remembered as due to skills rather than magic, but distorted in folklore until they are almost unrecognisable, containing a mere kernel of the truth behind the legend.

I mentioned above that Merlin is reminded of the Wild Hunt when he hears geese alight from the Glastonbury lake. Glastonbury is surrounded by much folklore. Some scholars identify it with Avalon. In folklore it is an entrance to the Otherworld,

¹⁶² Aneirin, “Y Gododdin”, at <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/sources/aneirin.html>

¹⁶³ Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, quoted in Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur’s Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury* (Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1957), p. 73.

¹⁶⁴ Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 118.

presided over by the King of the Fairies.¹⁶⁵ When Merlin and his retinue approach Glastonbury Tor in *The Last Enchantment* they meet an old shepherd who recounts a tale about a king who lived there and was conquered by invading forces and killed alongside his people. “[T]here was a grave for them all that day” (*LE*, p. 189), he says, in a reverse echo of “Stanzas of the Graves”.

The shepherd is unsure as to when this happened. Merlin interprets it as “a folk memory that had come down tongue to tongue in a winter’s tale by some peasant’s hearth” (*LE*, p. 190), an orally transmitted legend. Although it may have been based on a historical event – Merlin regards it as evidence that “[t]he place must have been fortified time out of mind” (*LE*, p. 190) – history has evolved into legend. The herdsman states that the king and his people are inside the hollow hill and ride out on summer nights: “‘They come wi’ the summer moon, and go back into the hill at dawning’” (*LE*, p. 190). White also refers to this belief. The version he mentions is, however, the one which has come down to us and where Arthur is the king who rides from Cadbury Castle to Glastonbury Tor with his men under the summer moon. Stewart suggests that many legends and tales about Arthur may originally predate him. He may have been incorporated into older tales such as this one, due to his great fame. Many Arthurian folk-tales are not necessarily Arthurian in origin, but have come to be told as such in order to accommodate them to people’s frames of reference. The original characters may have passed out of popular memory, while Arthur and his companions have remained important. As such, Arthur can be said to be a composite of various characters. There may have been a historical Arthur, but the legendary Arthur about whom so many tales tell, may owe elements of his personality, abilities and alleged deeds to more than one person, real or legendary.

¹⁶⁵ Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur’s Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury* (Glasgow: Collins, Fontana Books, 1973), pp. 20-21.

According to the shepherd, the King in his tale was killed by the Goddess, a pre-Christian deity, because he did not respect her (*LE*, pp. 202-203). Merlin says that Arthur “has come here with [the Goddess’s] guidance, to build his stronghold where the Goddess herself slew and buried a troop of strong fighters and their leader, to be the king-stone of his threshold” (*LE*, p. 203). Arthur supposedly has the blessing of the Goddess. Unlike the king in the shepherd’s tale there will be no grave for him, according to folklore. The clergy also trusts Arthur. Merlin is instrumental in this; he believes that the Christian God, local gods and nature spirits, and the gods of other cultures, such as those of the Roman pantheon, are all incarnations of the same deity or of certain aspects of that deity. “God himself is the sum of all that is on the face of the lovely earth” (*LE*, p. 133), he states. He is therefore able to pay reverence to the Christian God as well as the Goddess and pagan deities. As for the Old Ones, Merlin has “come to an understanding” (*LE*, p. 101) with them long ago. They also trust Arthur.

Kristina Hildebrand points out that the various religions depicted in Stewart’s trilogy “are all depicted as functioning beliefs, most of them containing no more truth than any other, but suitable for different people” (Hildebrand, p. 69). In some modern accounts of Arthurian legend, notably Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*, Arthur is torn between loyalty to the followers of the old and new religions. Stewart’s Arthur balances this out. He “will be crowned by the Christian bishops, and bend his knees to his parents’ God. But he is a man of this land, and he knows the gods of this land, and the people who still serve those gods on the hills and by the springs and fording-places” (*LE*, p. 48). This makes him a king for the people to identify with, both genuine Christians and those who officially follow the new religion but still worship at the old shrines to ensure good harvest and health.

Merlin interprets the shepherd's tale as concerning "old Celtic rulers here, or the Romans, or maybe both" (*LE*, p. 201). Legends and folklore do not necessarily date particular events. The tale of the sleeping king under the hill may already have been told about various peoples at this point. It is a recurrent folkloric motif.¹⁶⁶ This suggests the versatility of legend. One legend may be adapted to suit the fancies and needs of several peoples. Arthurian legend is a prime example. Arthur was probably a Welsh Celt. In literature, however, he is sometimes a Saxon or a Norman and in history, various dynasties have attempted to trace their genealogies back to him. A non-specific temporal setting, the fairy-tale "once upon a time", is implied by the fact that the shepherd speaks of Merlin in the same way and with the same setting in a distant, but diffuse past as the legendary king who rides on summer nights. He refers to him in the past tense (*LE*, p. 203). In the shepherd's account, Merlin is not only supposed to have said that dragons disrupted the building of Vortigern's fortress; he even "called up his dragons, and flew away through the heavens, safely" (*LE*, p. 203), calling a new king into Britain. The tale has passed into the realm of legend.

Merlin is aware that he and Arthur are quickly passing into folklore and legend. Stewart includes the part of Arthurian legend where Guinevere is kidnapped by Melwas. The abduction story is sometimes interpreted as an echo of the myth of Demeter and Persephone (Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, p. 110). Stewart's Merlin evokes this analogy himself. The abduction is real; Melwas kidnaps Guinevere because he is in love with her. Merlin and Bedivere are able to rescue her before the truth is known thanks to Merlin's second sight, which helps prevent a scandal. Those scholars who interpret Arthurian legend as entirely mythic in origin would claim that the abduction sequence is really intended to echo the Greek myth. Others, however,

¹⁶⁶ Elissa R. Henken, "Sleeping King [Sleeping Hero]" in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 389.

interpret it like Stewart, as an ordinary abduction. Chambers states that “a Celtic medieval chieftain might reasonably expect to take his neighbour’s wife without incurring the suspicion of Otherworld tendencies”.¹⁶⁷ Merlin deliberately describes the vision that led him to find Guinevere in terms of the Greek fertility myth, Merlin leaves no doubt that Guinevere was blameless in the abduction and does not deserve punishment. On the contrary, she is “succoured by the Goddess” (*LE*, p. 331). When she returns to Camelot, “spring will come at last, and the cold rains will cease, and we shall have a land growing rich once again to harvest, in the peace brought by the High King’s sword, and the joy brought by the Queen’s love for him” (*LE*, p. 331).

He includes not only the Greek myth, but claims that “in the sky beyond the hollow hill, I heard them galloping, the Wild Hunt where the knights of the Otherworld course down their prey, and carry them deep, deep into the jewelled halls of no return” (*LE*, p. 330). Merlin suggests that Guinevere was abducted by the King of the Otherworld. Evoking British folklore is a wise touch; it is presumably more familiar to most of those present than Greek myth and, accordingly, easier to identify with. He mentions that Arthur’s sword once hung in Llud’s halls, that is, the Otherworld (*LE*, p. 330). He has told this to the Glastonbury shepherd as well, to prove that Arthur is accepted by the old gods and spirits. At one point a man says about Arthur that “a king who has magic in his hand is a king to follow” (*HH*, p. 445). There is general consent about this. Fairies and other otherworldly beings were perceived as able to do mischief and even harm if displeased. A king who has received a sword from the Lord of the Otherworld as a token of acceptance bodes well for the future and deserves his people’s support.

¹⁶⁷ E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd., 1927), p. 214.

In the case of Guinevere's abduction, Merlin deliberately sows "the seeds of legend" (*LE*, p. 332). Spring does become glorious; and the people are grateful because the Queen was rescued from "the dark halls of Llud" (*LE*, p. 332). The connection between fertility and the rule of the rightful king is also apparent right after the marriage of Guinevere and Arthur. When Uther was ill "the land had lain under the black blight" (*LE*, p. 286). Now the weather becomes glorious and "the fields bore crops such as few men could remember, and the cattle and sheep grew sleek, and the land ripened toward a great harvest" (*LE*, p. 285). People credit Arthur for this, blessing him not only for bringing peace, but for "the wealth of the crops themselves" (*LE*, p. 286). This belief persists despite the fact that Christianity is taking hold and crosses are replacing "cairns or stone statues...by the wayside" (*LE*, p. 286).

In Tennyson, a belief is mentioned that Arthur is not human, but "only changeling out of Fairyland" (Tennyson, p. 41). Alleged changelings were cruelly mistreated; according to folklore the only way to get one's own child back was to treat the changeling so horribly that its fairy mother came back and exchanged it for the human child again (Briggs, *The Fairies*, p. 139). Stewart uses the changeling myth in a more mundane way which does not involve supernatural intervention. When Morgause gives birth to Mordred she is married to Lot. There are rumours that Mordred is the son of Arthur rather than of Lot, as indeed he is. Morgause realises that Lot will kill the illegitimate child. Lot is away when he is born. When he returns Morgause has exchanged Mordred for her nurse's child. "[T]he changeling lies there in the castle, while Arthur's son, Morgause's tool of power, is hidden nearby" (*LE*, p. 152). Lot kills the child. In folklore, changelings are fairy children. In Stewart's account, the changeling is merely believed to be an illegitimate child. Even so, like

the changelings of folklore, the child is cruelly treated because Lot believes it is not his. When he realises his mistake, Lot orders that all children born on May Day are to be placed in a ship and set adrift at sea. Mordred is saved, but the others die. Stewart's Lot makes sure it appears that Arthur is the one to order the children killed. In most accounts of Arthurian legend where this incident is included it is indeed blamed on Arthur.

In Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* ('The Life of Merlin'), Merlin goes mad after the battle of Arfderydd and lives in the woods almost like an animal for a period. "He became a Man of the Woods, as if dedicated to the woods. So for a whole summer he stayed hidden in the woods, discovered by none, forgetful of himself and of his own, lurking like a wild thing".¹⁶⁸ The notion that he goes mad after this battle is also found in the Welsh *Annals* and some of the triads. The motif of the king who goes insane after a battle and lives in the wilderness for a while is found in the Irish tale *Suibne Geilt* ('Sweeney Astray').¹⁶⁹ It also occurs in the legend of Lailoken (Rowling, p. 52). The Sweeney and Lailoken legends may be the basis for the legend of Merlin, or they may be analogous to it.¹⁷⁰ Hallucinating, Merlin runs away and stays for a while "deep in the autumn forest, unheeded as a wraith of the forest mist" (*LE*, p. 232). The Old Ones find him in a cave and take care of him during winter. Eventually he is found wandering among the dead and wounded after a battle, advising the doctors (*LE*, p. 238). Arthur's men first think he is "one of those wild hermits" (*LE*, pp. 238-39), suggesting that there hermits who are perceived as crazy and half animal do indeed live in the woods.

¹⁶⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Life of Merlin*, quoted at <http://www.geocities.com/branwaedd/merlini.html>

¹⁶⁹ Seamus Heaney, translator, *Sweeney Astray*, revised edition (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

¹⁷⁰ Brynley F. Roberts, "Myrddin" in Lindahl et al, *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 282.

In Stewart's trilogy the reason for Merlin's madness is that Morgause poisons him. Later on, the same thing happens, leading to Merlin being buried alive. According to folklore Nimue enchants him. Stewart once again provides a realistic explanation. He falls in a coma, but no magic is involved. When he is rescued and returns to Camelot, he has lost his visionary powers, suggesting that they were indeed facilitated by his celibacy, or at least that they required great concentration and focus. Having a romantic relationship appears incompatible with retaining strong spiritual powers. After his return Merlin lives a quiet life. Most people are unaware that he is alive. Stewart presumably intends to suggest that they believe his death had to do with his apprentice Nimue. People may believe that she killed him, which in folklore may have led to a belief that she enchanted him. In fact, he has settled down to a quiet, unremarkable life. The Merlin who inspired the legends is gone.

Stewart includes numerous details from early Arthurian accounts. These are often mentioned in passing, but still serve to place her firmly within the Arthurian tradition. There is the abovementioned claim that Arthur killed nine hundred men himself in one battle, which suggests the invincibility attributed to him in folklore. Merlin claims to be the creator of the original version of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer", of which he has "heard versions...since, elaborated by some famous Saxon singer, but the first was my own" (*LE*, p. 113). Camelot is said to be "a marvellous sight, and one which is familiar now to travellers from the four corners of the world" (*LE*, p. 194). This may be an allusion to John Leland's account from the mid-sixteenth century, which mentions Camelot.¹⁷¹ This does, of course, happen half a millennium later, but Stewart may be suggesting that Camelot is a landmark from the beginning. Arthur wears "Ygraine's token" (*LE*, p. 257) in battle, a "brooch with

¹⁷¹ John Leland, *Itinerary*, quoted at <http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/leland.html>

the name MARIA engraved around the rim” (*LE*, p. 257). This echoes Nennius, who writes that Arthur carried the Virgin on his shield (or shoulder) in battle. There is also a mention of Gildas, who has been sent to Blaise, an old friend of Merlin’s, “to learn to read and write” (*LE*, p. 358). Gildas is to grow up to write *De Excidio Britanniae*, a work which notably makes no mention of Arthur, although its subject matter is the British kings. This has been taken as proof that Arthur never existed. According to some, however, Gildas avoids mentioning him due to a personal quarrel. These and numerous other allusions illustrate Stewart’s detailed familiarity with the Arthurian tradition.

Also, Stewart’s Arthur marries two Guineveres. The first dies in childbirth. Merlin has, in accordance with legend, foreseen that the marriage is unlucky. When Bedivere and Arthur visit him as children a white owl flies through the shrine. Merlin interprets this as a bad omen, because “its shadow went over my skin like a hand of ice, and I shivered” (*HH*, p. 322). The Celtic word for a white shadow is *guenhwywar*. When Arthur’s first wife dies in childbirth, Merlin and Arthur believe that to be the reason for the sense of foreboding. Merlin’s vision is useful on many occasions, for instance in the case of Vortigern’s tower and Guinevere’s abduction; but also elusive and difficult to interpret. As it turns out, his foreboding refers to the second Guinevere. She betrays Arthur, not with Lancelot, but with Bedivere. While Lancelot is introduced into Arthurian legend in the romances, Bedivere is mentioned as Arthur’s companion even in *The Mabinogion* (where he is called Bedwyr)¹⁷² and in early Welsh poems.¹⁷³ The idea that Arthur has several wives named Guinevere is from the British Triads.¹⁷⁴ This may suggest a connection to the Triple Goddess.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Lady Charlotte Guest, translator, *The Mabinogion* (London: Voyager, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), p. 83.

¹⁷³ “Who is the Porter?” at <http://www.mythiccrossroads.com/PaGur.htm>

¹⁷⁴ The Triads of the Island of Britain”, at <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/sources/triads.html>

A cross which was found in Arthur's alleged grave at Glastonbury also stated that Guinevere, with whom he was buried, was his second wife.

Stewart also includes references to modern works, among them White and Tennyson. People wonder if Camelot was built by music, in *The Last Enchantment* as in *Idylls of the King*. When Merlin comes down to the sea after Lot has set the babies adrift, he sits there while "on the sea the wailing dies away" (*LE*, p. 168), an almost direct quote of Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur", which ends with the words "on the mere, the wailing died away" (Tennyson, p. 300). In Tennyson, the wailing is that of the queens who fetch Arthur. In Stewart, less mysteriously and more cruelly, it is that of the children. The "wolves and wild men" (*LE*, p. 126) roaming northern Britain echo both Tennyson and White. Another nod to White is the scene where Merlin has been appointed Vortigern's magician and is presented with new clothes, "the sort of stuff they think a magician ought to wear" (*CC*, p. 310). Merlin exasperatedly says, "Not long white robes with stars and moons on them" (*CC*, p. 310). White's Merlin wears "a flowing gown with fur tippets which had the signs of the zodiac embroidered over it".¹⁷⁶

Stewart places herself firmly within the literary, historical and folkloric Arthurian tradition. While Merlin's second sight is the most direct non-realistic element in her books, her early medieval Britain is a society characterised by superstition and belief in pagan gods. When folklore first became the subject of systematic research, folklore was considered the beliefs and traditions of the lower social classes and of rural rather than urban areas. Tennyson's account is somewhat influenced by this. As I mentioned in Chapter II, he tends to mention non-realistic

¹⁷⁵ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), p. 33.

¹⁷⁶ Terence Hansbury White, *The Once and Future King: The Complete Edition* (London: Harper Collins, 1996) p. 24.

elements in dialogue. Often the speakers are “common people”, suggesting that they were the ones who believed in supernatural events and creatures and used them to explain events. This has changed, and folklore is now regarded as beliefs, customs and traditions belonging to any social group, regardless of class or status. Although Stewart suggests rational explanations for many beliefs, she depicts early medieval Britain as a place where pagan religion and superstition are alive among royalty and educated people as well as those who belong to lower social classes. Merlin, who is Arthur’s cousin and a highly educated man, is deeply concerned that the old gods and spirits need to be honoured, and he expresses his belief in non-realistic phenomena on several occasions, in addition to his second sight. “Magic is the door through which mortal man may sometimes step, to find the gates in the hollow hills, and let himself through into the halls of that other world” (*LE*, p. 133), Merlin says, implying that there is a world beyond our mundane one. At another point he cites animal folklore: “They say that a white deer is a magical creature. I believe that this is true” (*LE*, p. 44). And although Merlin knows that those who are considered fairies are human, he still believes that the hills they haunt “still [hold]” gates into the Otherworld (*LE*, p. 44). “Still” suggests that even in Merlin and Arthur’s days, fairies and the Otherworld are regarded as belonging to the past. This is, as we have seen, typical of such beliefs, and may have been so even at this time, although it may also be an anachronism.

There are those who feel that the realistic approach to Arthurian legend does not quite work. Richard Barber says in reference to Stewart’s trilogy that “it is after all the sheer magnificence of Arthur’s achievement that makes his tragedy so overpowering in the traditional account, and only an exceptional writer can wring the

same pathos from the tribal brawls of fifth-century Britain”.¹⁷⁷ Ashe expresses concern about the substitution of Bedivere as Guinevere’s lover, because “[f]or readers, no less than for writers, the notion of ‘integrity’ connotes two quite different things”¹⁷⁸: For some, staying true to “the latest historical and archaeological evidence” (Lacy and Ashe, p. 196) is the chief concern. For others, one specific version of the legend is “so firmly established that any substantial departure, even if made in the name of truth and accuracy, will provide a shock” (Lacy and Ashe, p. 196) He suggests that many readers prefer to hear a familiar version told in a slightly different way, to a different one. As both Barber and Ashe imply, what many readers connect with Arthurian legend is not the fifth-century warlord, no matter how historical he might be, but the high medieval king in his castle, surrounded by knights in armour. The retellings of the legend and the time-coloured imagery and folklore surrounding it have left a greater impression on the public mind than the possible truth. While Barber and Ashe are worried about the appeal of the legend being lost when it is set in the fifth century, other critics have felt that Stewart’s Arthur himself is “a romantic hero [who] belongs to the older tradition of Arthurian literature” and that only the setting “takes advantage of recent scholarly research”.¹⁷⁹

In my opinion, Mary Stewart manages to keep a lot of the heroism of Arthurian legend while being true to many aspects of the time period. While her characters’ modern moral attitudes may not always be realistic, they do make her characters easy to identify with. Tennyson’s Arthur is a man apart, a chosen king. White’s Arthur encounters various folkloric creatures and spends his afterlife in the company of

¹⁷⁷ Richard Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1990), p. 198.

¹⁷⁸ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), 196.

¹⁷⁹ Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Literature since 1900* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 305.

talking animals. Stewart's Arthur is, on the other hand, a completely ordinary, though intelligent and charismatic, man. The other characters are also regular human beings. As a result, Merlin's second sight sets him sufficiently apart to evoke the magical aspect that is so pervasive in Arthurian legend. Although Stewart provides hypotheses on the origin of many elements of myth and folklore in Arthurian legend, Merlin is singular enough and his achievements outstanding enough to make the reader understand how legends might arise about him. The same is true of Arthur.

Stewart's most significant achievement and the factor which sets her retelling apart when it comes to folklore is the way she gives tentative explanations for several instances of Arthurian folklore. When Tennyson wrote, folklorists, for instance Crofton Croker, to whom he refers, had begun to systematically document British folklore. By the time White started writing *The Once and Future King*, a lot of literature on British folklore was available to him. Stewart is clearly familiar with these traditions as well. When she wrote her trilogy, however, the emphasis within Arthurian studies had turned to the historical Arthur and early medieval Britain in general, and her work is characterised by this. Stewart combines historical and folkloric evidence with her own inventions to suggest the background of many superstitions about Arthur, fairies and other folkloric figures and events. It still works well that she also uses it in a regular way, to express the superstition of the period and the magic connected with Arthurian legend. Even in a comparatively realistic retelling, Stewart manages to create the familiar feeling that "Arthurian society" exists in the borderland between reality and legend.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Arthurian legend has formed the basis for a significant subgenre of fantasy, and the many aspects of the Arthurian tradition – history, mythology, folklore, and literature, have proved interesting to explore. I initially set out to write about Arthurian legend in general and how it is used in fantasy literature. I quickly realised that this was much too broad a topic and that I needed to narrow down my focus. Eventually I decided to look at the use of folklore in Arthurian literature, both specifically Arthurian and general folklore.

I chose to write about three Arthurian works from different time periods. Tennyson, Stewart and White are all influenced by the time period in which they wrote, and their versions are rather different, although they recount the same legend. It is, however, interesting to note that despite their differences, all three authors use many of the same folklore elements. Although their approaches to (Arthurian) folklore vary, they do share a common frame of reference. This is also true of many of their readers. Modern retellings of the legend might appeal more to modern readers than medieval versions, and help make new generations familiar with it. White's *The Once and Future King* has been extremely influential in this regard.

Modern Arthurian literature is usually found in the fantasy section. This is true even of Stewart; although her Arthurian story is fairly realistic, it still contains enough non-realistic elements to be categorised as fantasy. It is, however, significant that almost all the non-realistic elements in the works of all these authors are based on actual mythology, legend and folklore. There are a few exceptions, such as Tennyson's alternative tale of Arthur's birth. But significant elements, such as the supernatural creatures, all belong to folklore. Most people will have some

preconception of what to expect when presented with a troll, fairy or giant. The author does not have to provide a lot of background information. They function well as symbolic elements. When the novice in Tennyson's "Guinevere" describes happy spirits and fairies in and around Camelot a Victorian reader will presumably have connected them with innocence, as seems to be the poet's intent. The fact that not only Arthurian literature, but a lot of fantasy literature in general is based on actual mythology, legendary material and folklore shows that folklore has not lost its relevance and appeal, it is merely used and transmitted in different ways than it used to be. It is now passed on in literature rather than through oral transmission (although the storytelling tradition still survives to some degree). Adding actual folklore to a work gives it a sense of magic and the otherworldly, while still maintaining a connection with the real world by drawing on actual traditions.

The works I have written about are all relatively recent. The use of general folklore in early Arthurian literature is also an interesting subject, as I touch upon in chapter one. During the medieval period, folklore was not an area of research as such. Folklore was a significant part of everyday life, but it was not documented in a systematic fashion. What we know about traditions and customs from this period we know mainly from literary works. In for instance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the writer's inclusion of specific customs and traditions helps preserve them for the future. In more recent fiction, such as the fantasy novels of the past decades, the inclusion of Arthurian folklore helps place a work within a larger context which is not only literary, but cultural as well.

During the past two centuries, folklorists have done extensive research on folklore and numerous accounts have been compiled. The use of folklore in fiction represents the creative use of known traditions. Katharine Briggs states that

[o]ne of the most fascinating aspects of the study of Literature [sic] is to observe the way in which folk traditions, beliefs and legends are drawn up by poets and story-tellers from the common stock and shaped into literature, which in its turn enriches the common stream of tradition, is re-shaped as folk-tales, ballads and proverbial sayings, until these in turn become the inspiration of a new poet.¹⁸⁰

She suggests that folklore and literature enrich each other mutually. Literature breathes life into folklore and puts it to use in new contexts, for instance in the case of Tennyson, who uses it symbolically. It makes new generations of readers familiar with a part of their cultural heritage that they might not otherwise be aware of and increases its appeal by using it in a context with which the readers are able to identify. Folklorists continue to write extensively about the beliefs and traditions of particular people and areas, but their work is not necessarily widely read by the general population. The inclusion of it in fiction makes folklore more easily available to a greater number of people. The use of folklore in literature enriches literature in its turn. It adds a cultural anchoring and a magical aspect to a literary work.

In the case of Arthurian legend this element of magic is of vital importance. Its mysterious aspect is presumably still an important part of its continuing appeal, and folklore is probably the main reason why the legend has survived for so long. Only sporadic literary Arthurian references are made during the first five or six hundred centuries after Arthur may have lived. Even so, travellers' accounts from the twelfth century mention a number of places with an Arthurian connection. It is also likely that Geoffrey's account is at least partly based on actual folklore, despite its dubious historical value, as are the romances. This implies a flourishing oral tradition.

Arthurian folklore was even known outside Britain. Wace states that the Round Table was known from Breton folklore when he documented it. The first instance of Arthur as a sleeping king was first documented about Mount Etna on Sicily; and the

¹⁸⁰ Katharine Mary Briggs, "Introduction" in *British Folk-Tales and Legends: A Sampler* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

tradition that Arthur's soul resides in a raven is first mentioned by the Spanish author Cervantes. Arthur's fame spread beyond the borders of Britain.

The numerous traditions on the passing and expected return of Arthur, the Avalon tradition and the cave legends, are direct results of the Britons' hope and trust in their legendary leader who would one day come back to help them. These tales have apparently been told since long before Geoffrey wrote his account of British kings, if early sources such as "Stanzas of the Graves" and William of Malmesbury's comment that "ancient songs" profess Arthur's return, are anything to go by. Other folkloric traditions do not stress his return, but still imply his immortality, for instance the Cornish belief that Arthur's resides in a raven and the tradition that Arthur rides with the Wild Hunt or a ghostly company of his men on summer nights. The expected return of the king is presumably the main reason why Arthurian legend has proved so long-lived. That the exhumation of Arthur's alleged grave was done partly to make the Britons stop waiting for the return of Arthur suggests the reverence with which he was viewed and how literally the notion of his return was once taken.

My thesis touches upon mythology on several occasions. Mythology and folklore are certainly related subjects. Unlike folklore, however, mythology refers to beliefs which are part of a religious system. I have chosen not to focus on this. I do touch upon it, for instance in the case of the Celtic gods which are still being worshipped in Stewart's trilogy. This worship does, however, have a certain relation to folklore. Even Christians continued to pay their respects to the old gods, for centuries after the new religion took hold in Britain. People may no longer have followed the pagan religion as such, but its deities and their protection continued to be important, although the gods gradually passed into folklore and came to be

regarded as fairies and similar beings. As for Arthurian legend, there seems to be mythic traces in some of the characters and motifs encountered in literary accounts of it. There is, as we have seen, disagreement about whether or not Arthurian legend has its origin in mythology.

I chose to focus on Arthurian folklore and general folklore in Arthurian literature instead of mythology. Arthurian folklore is interesting both in itself and in the broader context of Arthurian legend and literature. It can provide clues about the possible historical Arthur. Although many Arthurian place names were coined long after the possible historical Arthur lived, there are some which tradition suggests might have an actual connection with him, such as Tintagel Castle on the Cornish coast, and Glastonbury. Although a lot of Arthurian folklore originated long after the possible historical Arthur, the fact that it occurs mainly in the Celtic areas of Britain suggests a link to early traditions. As Ashe remarks, the romances have left relatively little impression on folklore.¹⁸¹ Some Arthurian folklore is also tied to places which were under Anglo-Saxon dominion. This suggests the widespread fame of Arthur. And of course, Arthurian folklore is valuable in and of itself. The Arthurian tradition is Britain's most extensive body of legends, and a significant element of its cultural and mythical heritage. As such, it does, in my opinion, deserve attention.

Research into general folklore in Arthurian literature is of value in connection with literary criticism and research. A folkloristic approach might help facilitate our understanding of many elements in medieval Arthurian literature. The use of folklore also adds a dimension at once magical and traditional to modern Arthurian works. As for Arthurian folklore, most non-fictional books about Arthur treat it in a subsection, and books on general British folklore mention Arthurian folklore. To my knowledge,

¹⁸¹ Geoffrey Ashe, *The Mythology of the British Isles*, second edition (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 257.

however, no comprehensive overview of it exists. In my opinion, such an overview would constitute a valuable addition to the existing body of literature on the Arthurian tradition.

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